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NEO

ANIME MANGA DISPLAY MUSIC

Issue 183

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ATLITA: BATTLE ANGEL / SHOPLIFTERS / ONE CUT OF THE DEAD
DRAGON BALL SUPER: BROLY / NEW CARDCAPTOR SAKURA / MFKZ

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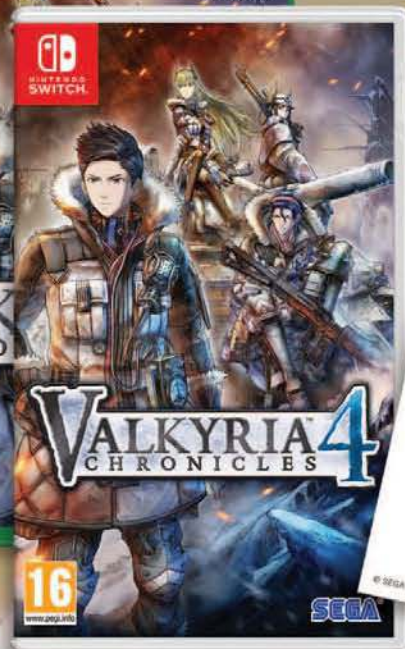
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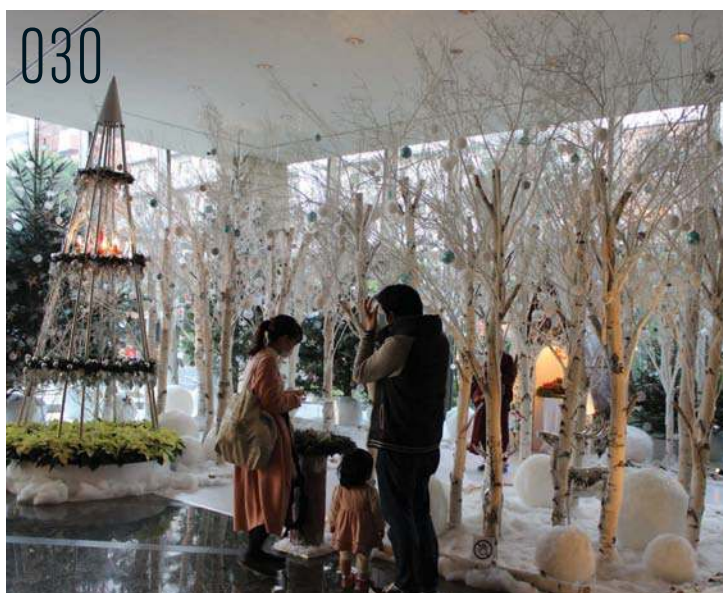
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WELCOME

WELCOME TO issue 183 of NEO! This end of year issue is one of my favourites to put together, as we get a sneak-peek of all the exciting things that will be coming our way in the new year. 2019 looks set to be full of some incredible anime and movies, and our biggest ever preview feature for anime starts on page 008, while our movie coverage begins on page 056. There's so much to cover we've extended our feature over last year's final page count, which is always great news for what's to come!

It wouldn't be the end of year without the NEO Award results, and this year our awards have been sponsored by SEGA. I can't wait for you all to find out which titles and companies we'll be honouring in the next mag, so make sure you pick up the new issue when it's on sale on 24 January. It's always nice to look back on the last 12 months and realise what a fantastic year we've had in the world of Asian entertainment!

If you'd like even more to look forward to when it comes to this issue, make sure to check out Mark Guthrie's excellent piece on what Christmas is really like in Japan, over on page 030. And if you'd like to experience the Land of the Rising Sun for yourself, check out our NEO New Year piece on page 064, where we list things you absolutely must do on a visit to Tokyo! We hope you enjoy – and let us know what would make your list by tagging us on social media.

Make sure you flip this issue for a look at new rhythm games *Persona 3: Dancing In Moonlight* and *Persona 5: Dancing In Starlight*. David West interviews producer Kazuhisa Wada about these quirky instalments in the *Persona* franchise!

Until next time!

GEMMA COX, EDITOR



MEET THE TEAM

JONATHAN CLEMENTS



"Shooting has overrun on season five of my TV show, *Route Awakening*, for National Geographic, so I shall be spending 25th December

standing on an archaeological dig site somewhere in China, talking about human sacrifice. Best Christmas ever."

EMILY LOVELL



"Last Christmas I visited Hong Kong and can safely say it's an excellent destination for this time of year - for a start it's way

warmer than the UK! My article this month aims to give you a flavour of some of the things you can see and do during your stay. Enjoy!"

DAVID WEST



"I'm tentatively hopeful about the live action *Alita: Battle Angel*. That's probably my favourite manga series of all time,

so if Robert Rodriguez and James Cameron manage to bungle it all up, I shall be sorely displeased."

TOM SMITH



"I'm typing this update from sunny Thailand! I needed a boat to be able to get to the hotel, even though it's on the mainland! It's

deep in the jungle and there's so road, so you have to go around by sea. Amazing! But you have to look out for the monkeys. They steal everything!"

MARK GUTHRIE



"After gorging myself on KFC and cake for Christmas, it's apt that January begins the year of the pig. However, gluttony aside, my

New Year will be about animals of another kind, as I explore the unusual pet cafes around my town."

ALEX JONES



"I've been putting together a list of my favourite Christmas anime episodes and specials to watch over the holiday period. *Tokyo*

Godfathers, *Toradora!* and *Love Hina* were all instant choices... *Gundam Wing: Endless Waltz* counts too right?"

ANDREW OSMOND



"Some Christmas anime ideas: For all ages, there's the charming *Mary and the Witch's Flower*. For lovelorn teens, there's the snowy

first section of *5 Centimeters per Second*. *Tokyo Godfathers* has an adult edge but also tons of heart."

JACOB BONIFACE



"I've been taking some time out and getting around to watching a whole bunch of great series this month that I missed

throughout 2018, as well as looking forward to a lot of new stuff, in the form of both anime and video games, that's still to come in 2019!"

"ONE OF THE BEST FOREIGN-LANGUAGE
ZOMBIE MOVIES OF THE LAST TWENTY YEARS."
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Screen Anarchy

third window films



ANIME FOR 2019!

There's a lot to look forward to in the New Year, but judging by this list, most of you out there will need to resolve to watch more anime over the next 12 months! NEO and Jacob Boniface run down some of the most interesting series that will be filling up our calendars.





MEGALO BOX

Eye of the Tiger, Arms of a Robot!

Set in a far-flung, possibly post-apocalyptic future, *Megalo Box* was definitely one of the surprise hits of the year – incorporating a distinctive and gorgeous retro art style, with some sensational animation and the kind of classic underdog story that you can't help but love. In the aforementioned futuristic wasteland, the most popular sport by far is Megalo Boxing – much like present-day boxing, but with the notable difference that the participants have robotic arms attached – or surgically grafted – to their own. Junkdog, *Megalo Box*'s plucky hero, is too poor to be able to afford the kind of fancy technological equipment that the world's best boxers use, but that

doesn't stop him from dreaming! Junkdog's goal is to win Megalonia, the world's premier boxing tournament, in order to get a rematch with Yuri, the tournament's number-one fighter.

Megalo Box was created by none other than TMS Entertainment, one of the oldest – and most talent-filled – animation studios in Japan, who were responsible for *D.Gray-Man*, *Lupin The Third*, and a little film called *Akira*. This animation pedigree is present in every frame of *Megalo Box*, which has an aesthetic that evokes classic shows from the '80s and '90s, while still benefiting from the modern animation techniques of the present.

PERSONA5: THE ANIMATION

I Am Thou, Thou Art I...

Sometimes doing the right thing comes at a cost, as Ren Anamiya learns when he intervenes after witnessing an assault in the middle of the night. When it turns out that the ne'er-do-well was an influential player in the political scene, Ren is wrongfully branded a criminal himself, and sent to live in Tokyo on probation. Still more wrongdoing is revealed at Ren's new school, when he and his new friends Ryuji and Ann awaken mysterious powers in their efforts to expose the activities of a cruel and corrupt teacher. Armed with the newfound power of their Personas, the group – with the help of a talking cat, naturally – form the Phantom Thieves, a gang of mystical outlaws who steal not money or valuables, but the twisted desires of evildoers, forcing them to confess to their actions.

Though many of you might already be pretty familiar with *Persona 5*'s story through the original game, this is a perfect way to relive the experience, with a fresh take on the story through the series' amazing-looking animation. And for those yet to check out the Phantom Thieves and their righteous crusade, next year will give you a whole new opportunity to do so!





DRAGON BALL SUPER: BROLY THE MOVIE

The Original Super Saiyan!

The release of *Dragon Ball Super* has arguably revitalised the much-beloved *Dragon Ball* franchise, bringing many new fans into the fold, while *Manga's* re-releases of the classic *Dragon Ball Z* movies have given stalwart admirers of Goku's adventures the chance to revisit the classic stories of their youth. Now a combination of the two is on the horizon, as *Dragon Ball Super: Broly The Movie* revives a fan-favourite villain, bringing him into the 21st century with a reworked origin but the same old classic design!

Broly, the eponymous villain from 1993's movie *Broly - The Legendary Super Saiyan* has always been a key figure in the *Dragon Ball* mythos, not

to mention one of the toughest foes that Goku has ever had the misfortune to face off against! But while the early *DBZ* movies were tough to fit into the canon, this latest flick will bring Broly into the fold once and for all!

Series creator Akira Toriyama has also been deeply involved with the latest feature, stating that new and old fans of the series will be satisfied with the retelling of this classic story, which will not only reunify elements of the canon but also bring never-seen-before characters to the screen, such as Goku's mother, Gine! And of course, what with this being a *Dragon Ball* movie and all, there's sure to be some fast-paced and explosive action to feast your eyes on along the way!

ANIME LIMITED



BARTENDER

Mixing it up!

UK shores are finally seeing the release of an underappreciated cult gem next year, as Anime Limited bring Araki Joh's *Bartender* to our screens for the first time! *Bartender* follows the shot-slinging slice of life adventures of Ryu Sasakura, a Parisian-trained bartender in Japan, who seems to have the uncanny ability to serve the exact right drink, at the exact right time, to his world-weary patrons. Throughout the manga series, which has run in various forms since its beginning in 2004 to the present day, Ryu's accomplishments and renown as a bartender grow and grow. However, the anime focuses on the beginning of his journey, his apprenticeship at the hidden and cozy Eden Hall bar in downtown Tokyo, helping a different eclectic customer in each episode. While the series only ran for 11 episodes, it won a small but devoted following.

RECORD OF GRANCREST WAR

Opposites Attract!

2019 looks set to continue the trend for fantasy action series – with 2013's light novel series *Record of Grancrest War* getting an adaptation into the world of anime at last! The series, which adapts the original novels' five-year run into a tight and action-packed two dozen episodes, charts the conflict and chaos that plagues the land, not to mention the adventures (and burgeoning romance) of Theo and Silica. An idealistic young knight and skillful mage, respectively, the pair become inseparable as they work together to reunify the people of their fantasy kingdom, and banish the overwhelmingly evil presence that has reared its ugly head once again! Together, Theo and Silica have both the magical and martial arts pretty much covered, and so it's difficult to see what could stand in their way, but with monsters, demons, and warring nations between them and victory, they'll still have their work cut out for them!



MVM



SEVEN MORTAL SINS

Hell on Earth

To look at it, you'd probably never guess that this series (originally based on a line of demonic anime figures) is a loose adaptation of John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. But appearances can be deceiving, as is also the case with the series' seemingly-angelic protagonist Lucifer! Cast down from Heaven for rebelling against God, Lucifer is also betrayed by the Seven Sins, the Lords of Hell, who force her into living on Earth, with only a demonic sidekick and an

unlucky human girl who crosses her path for company.

But Lucifer isn't wasting any time feeling sorry for herself – with her two new sidekicks in tow, she begins making plans to take the fight back to the very rulers of Hell that cast her down in the first place. She may not have her heavenly powers anymore, but the one thing that Lucifer can never lose is her indomitable will!



MANGA

MFKZ

Not Quite the City of Angels

MFKZ, also released under the name *Mutafukaz*, seems like a shoe-in for the weirdest anime release of next year. Following the diminutive Angelino, a resident of the gritty but always exciting Dark Meat City, *MFKZ* contains gunfights, car chases, aliens, intrigue, anthropomorphic animals and a hip-hop aesthetic that makes it look markedly different from any of the other movies out there right now! A French-Japanese collaboration between the critically-acclaimed game developer and animation studio Ankama, and *Tekkonkinkreet*'s Studio 4°C, this feature-length romp definitely has had no shortage of talented individuals working on it either. The movie received an enthusiastic reception when it was released in cinemas up and down the country a couple of months ago, so all that remains to be seen is if the weird and wonderful mélange of bizarre elements present in *MFKZ* works for casual viewers and anime fans alike, when Manga releases the movie for the small screen early next year!

FATE/STAY NIGHT: HEAVEN'S FEEL

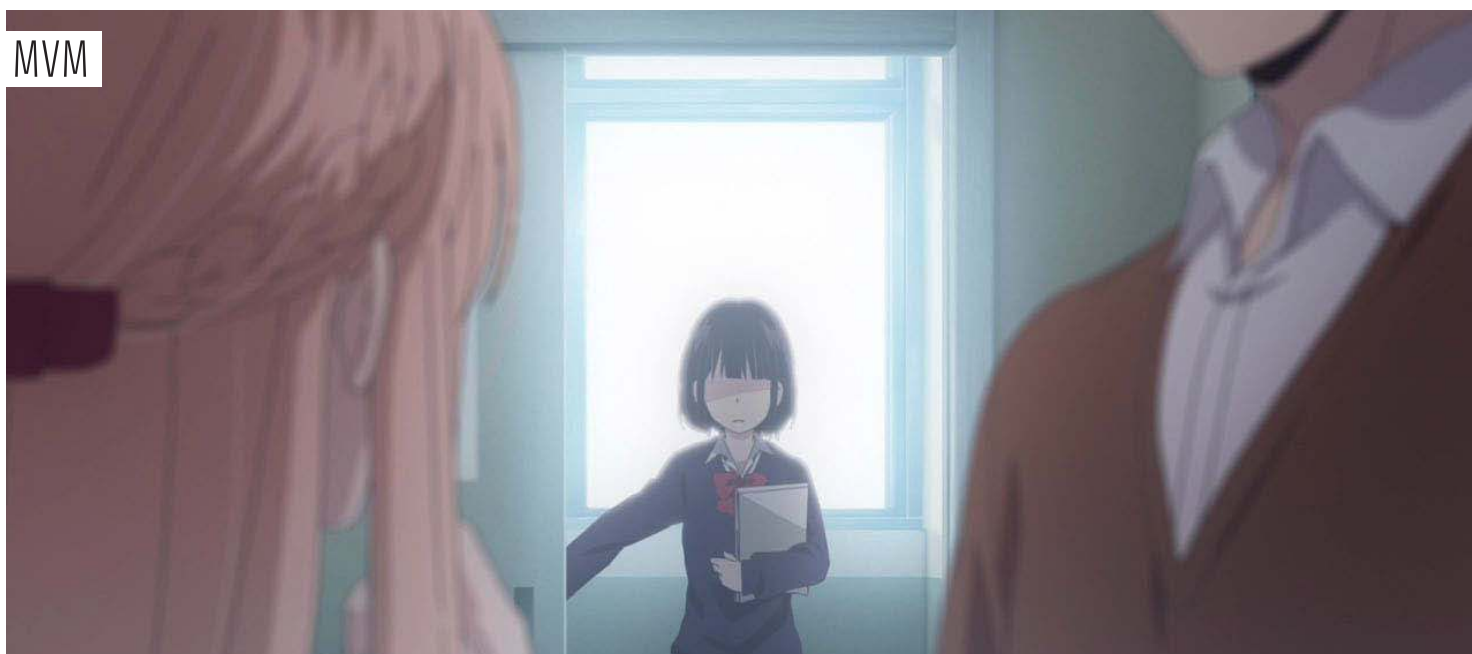
The Final Chapter...

There's few series that are as synonymous with the world of anime as *Fate/Stay Night*. Though originally a visual novel, the story has grown beyond what its creators could have dreamed of, with countless anime adaptations and spin-offs, other games, and manga retellings of the magical mayhem of the Holy Grail War.

However, devotees of the series will already be aware that one of the original game's scenarios has yet to receive an anime version – the *Heaven's Feel* section of the game. But that's soon to be all in the past, as two movies adapting the *Heaven's Feel* storyline will be released next year! The movies' storyline, which, like the other recent *Fate/Stay Night* adaptations by Ufotable, follows unconfident hero Shirou as he's pushed against his better judgement into a magical conflict, will differ from the previous versions in several key ways, but you'll just have to check out the movies yourself to find out how.



MVM



MVM

SCUM'S WISH

Bad Romance!

Acclaimed studio Lerche brings a twisted tale of romantic (and not so romantic) entanglements to the screen in the form of *Scum's Wish*, Mengo Yokoyari's seinen saga of love, sex, and Machiavellian scheming.

When Hanabi and Mugi come to realise that the crushes they both have on two of their school's teachers are doomed to failure, they decide to embark on a false relationship with each other in order to ease the sting of their loneliness. While a more clichéd series would have the pair realise that they were actually in love with each other all along, *Scum's Wish* is a grittier look at the more selfish and sordid forms that love can take, in both the case of Hanabi and Mugi's fake

courtship, and the other characters' often dark and deceitful relationships.

Despite the series' far from lighthearted tone, it has already proven a huge hit in the form of the original manga, and its previous adaptation into a live-action drama. While this new anime incarnation, by the aforementioned Lerche (the relatively new but undeniably talented studio behind *Assassination Classroom* and *Danganronpa*) adapts the full span of the manga's five-year run, author Yokoyari has already continued the series in a sequel manga, meaning those of you who find yourselves enjoying this dark romantic drama will likely soon be getting an animated sequel as well...



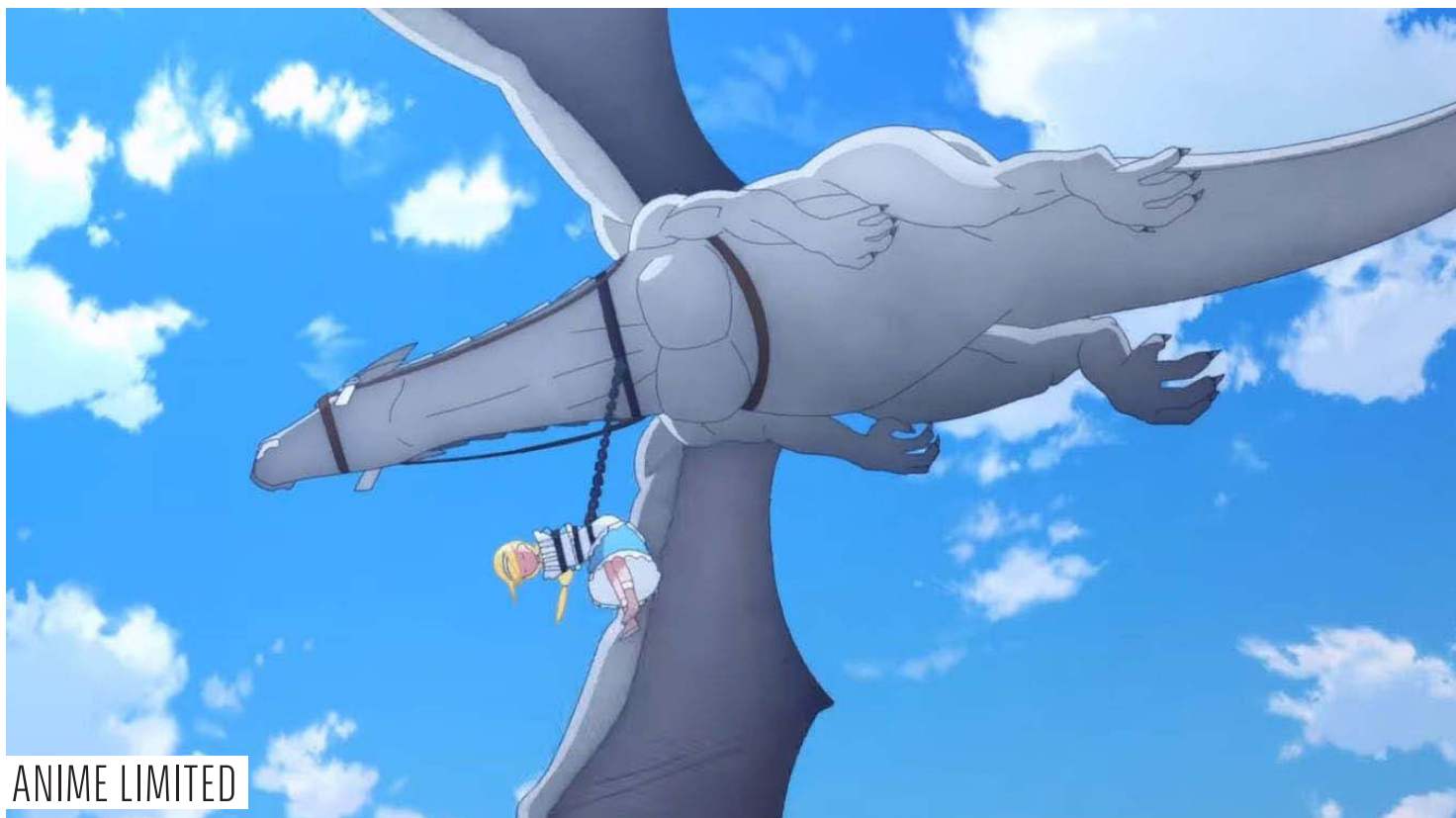
©Tomo Takeuchi;KODANSHA/Ogasawara Dance Studio Production Committee

WELCOME TO THE BALLROOM Dance Dance Animation!

After Production I.G.'s hit adaptation of *Haikyū!* was one of the biggest sporty series in the world of anime, it seems like they were more than ready to turn their talents to another athletic adaptation, but you've probably never seen a sports anime like this before! *Welcome to the Ballroom* follows a novice hero who doesn't dream of scoring goals or dunking baskets, but instead, after a chance encounter with a charismatic man who saves him from attackers, is inducted into the world of competitive ballroom dancing!

While it might seem to the untrained eye (and especially to the series' everyman protagonist Tatara) that dancing isn't as tough as the sports focused

on by other anime series, both he and the viewer soon learn that it is every bit as physically demanding and fiercely competitive as any other pastime. Luckily for Tatara, he finds that he has a natural aptitude for the sport. Although before his introduction into fancy footwork, he was aimless and unmotivated, with no hobbies or dreams for the future, his newfound love of dancing lights a fire under him, and it seems that while he doesn't learn new moves well in the traditional manner, he can recreate and mimic routines that he's seen before. A pretty useful skill, and one that he'll need to use to its full potential, as he goes up against some of the best dancers that Japan has to offer!



ANIME LIMITED

SWORD ART ONLINE: ALICIZATION Game Over...?

Sword Art Online has showed no signs of slowing down over the last year or so, with new series after new series dominating the release calendar – from new and diverse mainline series, to last year’s feature length *Ordinal Scale*, fans of the franchise have had no end of virtual adventures to get excited about! And 2019 is no different, with releases of two new SAO series dropping! The first of these is *Sword Art Online: Alicization* (take a peek over at the next page if you just can’t help but check what the other is!), which sees Kirito heading back to the familiar territory of a swords and sorcery adventure.

When testing a brand-new form of VR device known as a ‘Soul Translator’ which allows the user to inhabit a virtual world to a greater degree, Kirito becomes wrapped up in another life or death situation, but this time, his experiences are even more indistinguishable from reality, and his new home

– the AI-inhabited ‘Underworld’ – is fraught with just as many dangers, as Kirito fights for his life in two worlds at once!

As with the other two seasons of *Sword Art Online*, *Alicization* has been translated onto the screen by A-1 Pictures, the same studio behind *Blue Exorcist* and *Erased*. What’s more, new director Manabu Ono, whose previous credits include *The Asterisk War* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, takes the helm for the first time in this franchise, bringing a fresh new vision to add to the veteran talents of the studio’s team.

Both the studio and the new director have a reputation for some exemplary artwork and dynamic animation – a perfect match for the series’ frequent and elaborate battle sequences. *Alicization* looks well placed to provide the series’ legions of devoted fans more of what they have become accustomed to over the last few years!

CARDCAPTOR SAKURA: CLEAR CARD

More Magical Girl Mayhem!

Though it’s been a while since we’ve heard from her, *Cardcaptor Sakura* practically dominated the world of magical girl series in the ‘90s, standing up alongside giants of the genre such as *Sailor Moon* and *Magic Knight Rayearth* (also seeing a re-release in the coming year!) to pave the way for decades worth of future series. But now Sakura and her deck of magical clow cards are back once again for some effortlessly light-hearted adventures for nostalgic fans and new viewers alike, in the form of new series *Cardcaptor Sakura: Clear Card*. Rejoining our heroine directly after the events of the original series, *Clear Card* follows Sakura and her friends as they enter junior high school, with the tumultuous events of their adventurous past seeming to be behind them. But when a mysterious force causes Sakura’s cards to turn blank, robbing her of her powers, she’ll have to embark on another magical adventure in order to recapture the spirits that inhabit her cards – for good this time!



MANGA



SWORD ART ONLINE ALTERNATIVE: GUN GALE ONLINE

Locked and Loaded!

Sword Art Online just can't be stopped! Those of you familiar with the series' various arcs will already know of the immensely popular *Phantom Bullet* storyline, which saw Kirito and the party investigating a series of murders in a new VR game known as *Gun Gale Online*. Though the arc was a departure from the series' fantasy roots, with its focus on gunslinging and murder mystery, it was an instant hit with fans, so much so that a spin-off series of light novels was commissioned, penned by *Kino's Journey* author and self-proclaimed 'gun maniac' Keiichi Sigasawa. Now the series, named after its setting, *Sword Art Alternative: Gun Gale Online*, has received an animated adaptation that will hopefully be just as tense and action-packed as Kirito's

trigger-happy tale!

The spin-off, however, focuses on a new protagonist in the form of Karen Kohiruimaki, a short university student who has always felt like her small stature has gotten in the way of her dreams of heroism. However, in the VR world of *Gun Gale*, her similarly tiny avatar Lenn (who wields both the power of super-speed, and a pink P90 submachine-gun) has no problem taking on any opponent, be they big or small! Backed by her loyal but oddball squad of eccentric teammates, Lenn seeks out victory in the face of overwhelming odds and internal intrigue, as a player in this virtual but eerily realistic new world of warfare and weaponry!



MANGA

MAGIC KNIGHT RAYEARTH

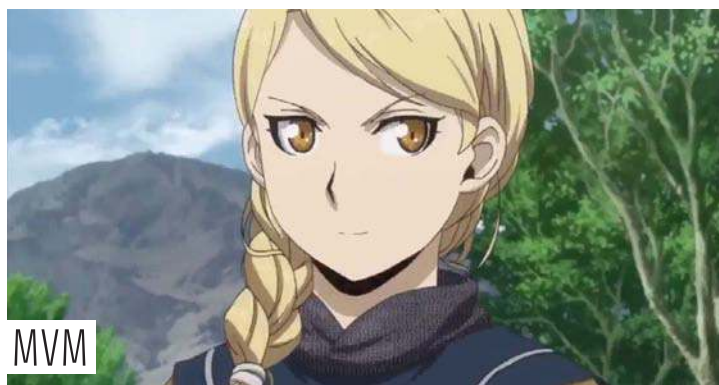
Knights to meet you!

Another blast from the past – but this time in its original form – beloved classic *Magic Knight Rayearth* is getting a shiny new suit of armour in the form of this Blu-ray re-release from the folks over at Manga! Hikaru, Umi, and Fuu are just three ordinary schoolgirls, until they go on a very *unordinary* school trip! Transported from the Tokyo Tower to the magical world of Cephiro, the girls are given magical powers to master, and a quest to find and rescue the Princess Emeraude before they can finally return home. However, things are not as simple as they might first seem, and the trio of heroines will have to make some tough choices if they ever want to see Tokyo again! With a simple premise but deceptively deep story, it seems likely that *Magic Knight Rayearth* will gain a whole new set of fans with this high-def makeover!

THE HEROIC LEGEND OF ARSLAN – SEASON TWO

Royal Rumble!

Prince Arslan hasn't exactly had the plush and privileged upbringing that you might expect from the heir to the throne of a thriving fantasy kingdom. Exiled from the city by invading forces, with both his father and mother captured, Arslan has had to prove himself as both a military and royal leader, all while keeping his small group of allies from being crushed by the overwhelming number of enemies on all sides. Though all his troubles might seem to be over when his father, the brutish King Andragoras, escapes from captivity, the king's cruel and jealous nature provides a new problem when he banishes Arslan from the country until he can return with thousands of new soldiers for his army. Joined by only a few of his trusted advisors and bodyguards, Arslan will have to contend once more with intrigue, battles, and new enemies in this latest chapter of his saga!



MVM



MVM

CELLS AT WORK! Internal Affairs

Cells at Work might well be one of the oddest premises for a series that saw a release in Japan this year, especially considering its almost instant success story! The action in the show focuses on different parts of the body in each episode, showcasing the trials and tribulations of the anthropomorphic versions of the cells that live and work there.

While it's definitely an unusual hook, the series' cute and charming depictions of the different types of microscopic characters was immediately

popular, with some avid viewers claiming that they'd even begun living a healthier lifestyle, as they couldn't bear the idea of harming the series' players through bad diet or lack of exercise!

With animation studio David Production (the team behind *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* and the upcoming *Sagrada Reset*) handling the adaptation of this quirky comedy manga by Akane Shimizu, it's not difficult to see why it's done so well!



STARMYU

High School Musical!

Anime series about aspiring stars and singers aren't really a new phenomenon, but it's safe to say that *STARMYU* has definitely carved out its own niche in the genre! Since the series' inception as a humble anime series in 2015, the show has spawned not only a sequel series and two OVAs, but also manga, stage shows, radio adaptations, and a variety of tie-in albums containing the series' toe-tapping soundtrack and exclusive extra stories!

While most series in the musical genre focus on female idols and girl bands, *STARMYU* bucks the usual trend by following the rise to stardom of a fledgling boyband. Yuta, Toru, Kaito, Kakeru, and Shu seem to have it made already, being students of the elite Ayanagi Academy, the premier school for anyone who wants to make it in the music business. However, the group have their sights set on an even loftier goal, acceptance into the 'Star Frame' class – the highest set of musical groups, mentored by the best

of the best of Ayanagi's students. Luckily, Yuta and his new friends (who name themselves 'Stardust') are noticed by an unusual but talented senpai – the eccentric Itsuki Otori – who promises to take them to the top! But their challenges are just beginning, as they soon learn that the Star Frame class is as competitive and sometimes cutthroat as you'd expect, and they'll have to work hard, be lucky, and sing their hearts out if they want to stand a chance of success!

As mentioned, the series has already been a huge success over in Japan – with a third season on its way – and with this new release of *STARMYU*'s first season by MVM, a whole new group of potential fans of Stardust will soon get their chance to make themselves known! Anyone who has a love for musical misadventures should get excited for this series, as it will almost certainly be one to keep an eye on through 2019 and beyond!



THE ANCIENT MAGUS' BRIDE

Not the most romantic of weddings...

Chise Hatori has such an unusually awful life that she goes to a truly drastic measure to change her situation, for better or worse. A rare form of mage with a debilitating power that will eventually lead to her untimely death, Chise decides she has nothing to lose, and summarily puts herself up for auction. However, even she was shocked when she discovered the nature of the highest bidder, Elias Ainsworth!

A half-human, half-fae creature with a skeletal head, Elias bids five million pounds to take Chise back to his home in London as his future bride, in the hopes that he will be able to cure her magical condition. While this sounds nearly ideal, Chise's new life draws her further still into the world of magic, and her new fiancé has a lot to learn about human beings and their behaviour...



ANIME LIMITED



CALAMITY OF A ZOMBIE GIRL

Dead Girl Walking!

You'd think by now, mischievous groups of teens in horror settings would have learned not to pinch things from corpses that they happen across. But if they had, we wouldn't have the gleefully gruesome *Calamity of a Zombie Girl* to look forward to next year!

As you might have guessed, the series indulges in a familiar horror trope, but the events of the plot look like nothing we've seen before! *Calamity of a Zombie Girl* follows the death-cheating exploits of a quintet of students, who put themselves in demonic crosshairs when they steal a mystical stone from a mysterious mummified body that they find in their university's library.

After finding out that the artefact, known as a 'Life Stone', is said to have given the mummies it was buried with immortality and incredible strength, it isn't long before the ragtag group realise just how much trouble they're in – as the stone's owners, in the form of the resurrected cadavers, come looking

for their pilfered treasure! But these aren't shambling corpses, who think only of eating the brains of the victims – Euphrosyne Studion, and her loyal servant Alma, are two vindictive and sadistic creatures who are more than content to have a little fun with the hapless thieves before they kill them one by one. The students have only one hope for survival – find out some way to kill or banish the zombies before their supernatural powers overwhelm them!

The series is being published for home release in the UK by Anime Limited, but it was originally created by prestigious studio Gonzo! With a long list of creations dating back to the early '90s, you've almost certainly seen something that Gonzo has had a hand in – and with such series under their belt as *Chrono Crusade* and *Afro Samurai*, it's certain that they're no strangers to horror and buckets of gore, which bodes well for this series (although maybe not for its unlucky protagonists!).



MVM

SAGRADA RESET

Turn Back Time!

In the world of *Sagrada Reset*, everyone has a small superpower – no shooting fireballs or invisibility here! For example, Kei Asai possesses the ability to remember absolutely every piece of information that he comes across. His new friend Misora, meanwhile, can reset time for up to three days. Though her power was previously considered useless as she loses the memories of everything she did before the reset, she finds a perfect ally in Kei, whose impeccable memory is impervious to her time-shifting powers. Together, the

seemingly-unstoppable pair join their school's 'Service Club', an organisation devoted to carrying out tasks for those in need of help, and attempt to right wrongs, and make things better for the people of Sakurada. However, they're far from being the only people with powers, some of whom will almost certainly be standing in their way as Kei and Misora attempt to do their good works! With a lot of intrigue, plotting, and supernatural twists and turns, this is definitely a series for fans of unique sci-fi concepts.



ANIME LIMITED

JIN-ROH: THE WOLF BRIGADE

Grim but Gorgeous!

Production I.G are back again for one of 2019's most anticipated releases – although this time, it isn't a new series, but rather the re-release of a beloved classic, bringing their visual talents up to date with a Blu-ray remaster. *Jin-Roh* is one of the most well-known movies by Mamoru Oshii, who penned the screenplay after having finished his previous project of directing *Ghost in the Shell* in 1995.

Set in an alternate version of 1950s Japan, *Jin-Roh* is a dark and philosophical feature that focuses on the relationship between Kazuki, a disgraced anti-terror police officer who fails to stop a terrorist bombing, and Kei, the sister of the deceased bomber. As the two get to know each other, it becomes clear that they are involved in plots within plots, so much so that it becomes doubtful if either one of them will make it out alive...

CYBER CITY OEDO 808

Retro Romp

Cyber City Oedo 808 is another re-release with a fresh new look, courtesy of Anime Limited, but is a much different, more rambunctious beast! A key part of the cyberpunk buzz of the early '90s, *Cyber City* combines action, sci-fi, and an over the top art style that fans of retro series will love.

Sengoku, Gogol and Benten are three hardened criminals with centuries left on their sentence, so when offered a deal to carry out some very specific (and dangerous) tasks, they can't help but accept. Each of the trio of mini-features sees a different member of the crew get a turn in the spotlight as they take on cyber-terrorists, robots, and vampires in their dubious quest for freedom, with plenty of action along the way!

It's been a long time since *Cyber City Oedo 808* has been available in the UK, so fans of '90s-style anime should snap this one up as soon as they get the chance!



ANIME LIMITED

MVM



KATSUGEKI: TOUKEN RANBU

Blade Boys!

In 1863, the people of Japan clashed in a civil war between the forces of the former shogunate, and those who were opposed – which is where *Katsugeki: Touken Ranbu* takes up its story. If this sounds like a fairly dry historical drama, then think again. The series mainly revolves around the adventures of Izuminokami, a literal 'sword warrior', who while appearing to be a young man, is actually the spirit of a historical katana, given life by magical forces. With a team of allies – who also take the form of weaponry from time to time –

in tow, Izuminokami leads the Second Unit in search of a mysterious artefact that can alter the flow of time, and bring the nation of Japan to peace at last. Of course, it won't be that easy when the other side has their own cadres of weapons-slash-soldiers in the fray as well! *Touken Ranbu* has already garnered itself a cult following with its mix of historical swordplay and diverse cast of characters, so this is definitely one that fantasy fans will want to check out for themselves when MVM brings it to Blu-ray and DVD next year!



ARMED GIRLS MACHIAVELISM Battle of the Sexists

Coming our way from MVM Entertainment on 4 February in a collector's edition Blu-ray set is *Armed Girls Machiavelism*, an action comedy based on an original manga by Yuya Kurokami and illustrated by Karuna Kanzaki, which began serialisation in *Monthly Shonen Ace* in 2014. The main character, Fudo Nomura, is a bit of a lout, and was expelled from his high school after indulging in an enormous fight. His only option for education now is the Private Aichi Symbiosis Academy, a previously all-girls school which has now started accepting boys. Well, when we say 'accept', we mean that very loosely, as the female students' first reaction to going co-ed was to demand to

be armed for self-defense. As a natural rebel, Nomura is far from happy when he learns that in order to blend in, he'll be expected to dress like a girl and wear makeup, like all the other male students. And who upholds the standards at school, you ask? None other than the Supreme Five Swords – five female students armed with blades, who are determined to keep Nomura in line. Featuring one of the most elaborate conceits we've seen for a while in order to justify its harem-style set-up, *Armed Girls Machiavelism* is about as batty as you might expect, as the show pits one manly boy with an attitude problem against a horde of uppity girls with swords... and attitude problems.



PRINCESS PRINCIPAL

Steampunk Spies

Currently on MVM's slate for a mid-February release is the collector's Blu-ray edition of *Princess Principal*. While we were originally promised the show would be out this year, it's been a long wait for the tales of steampunk London to reach its home shores in high-def.

Taking H. G. Wells' fictional concept of Cavorite – a miraculous substance that can subvert gravity – *Princess Principal* runs with it, imagining a fictional, Victorian-style Britain in which its discovery has caused a revolution. The result is a country split in two – on the one side, the Kingdom of Albion, still run by a monarchy, and the other side, the democratic Commonwealth of Albion, competing against its larger rivals who have the monopoly on Cavorite. But where there's technology and a conflict, there are spies to steal it, and what better spies to employ in an anime but girls? Cute ones, naturally.

The Commonwealth spies have a plot in hand to replace Princess Charlotte

with a lookalike called Ange, so they can have a mole on the inside of the royal family. Princess Charlotte is the fourth in line to the throne of the Kingdom of Albion, while her grandma – who is suspiciously Queen Victoria-esque – reigns as ruler. However, when the Princess becomes aware of the operation, she reveals her own ambition – to work with the spies so she can grab the throne for herself – or at least, that's what she claims. But is she a double agent? And why does she look so much like Ange? Could there be more than meets the eye to the Princess and her thirst for power?

One thing's for sure – you're not going to come away from *Princess Principal* without seeing some excellent, madcap episodes that are full of energy and creativity. And with a cast of five main spies, each with their own special abilities, you're sure to find a favourite to root for as the missions mount up. Lies, secrets, and tragic back stories abound!



VATICAN MIRACLE EXAMINER

Dan Brown Meets The Exorcist

Join a dynamic duo of priests as they investigate miracles around the world, trying to discover the truth behind them using their scientific expertise. Hiraga Joseph Kou is a mathematician and scientist, whilst Robert Nicholas is a linguist and cryptographer – together they'll uncover dark secrets, mysteries, murders, and conspiracies as they work for the secretive organisation The Seat of the Saints. Based on a light novel series by Rin Fujiki and illustrated by THORES

Shibamoto, which began in 2007 and is still running today, Media Factory's adaptation of *Vatican Miracle Examiner* continues anime's fascination with the inscrutable and arcane symbols of the Catholic faith. With a tendency to throw as many occult accoutrements as possible into the mix (Ouija boards! Sex cults! Nazis! Séances! Satanists!), no one could accuse the show of being unambitious. MVM will release a Blu-ray collection of the series on 25 February.



MADE IN ABYSS Deeper Underground

Space isn't the final frontier after all – turns out, not only can you go up, but you can also go down. Deep down! The titular Abyss isn't just some hole in the ground – it's an adventure. It's a mystery. And it's full of dangers – not least a sickness that grips you if you try to return to the surface too quickly. Inside the Abyss there are monsters, but there's also treasure to be had too – too tempting for adventurers, known as Cave Raiders – to ignore.

Rico is the daughter of one such adventuress, named Lyza, who has long since vanished into the Abyss. Raised in an orphanage ever since, Rico longs to walk in her mother's footsteps, and when she's delivered a note from her

mother via an elite group of Cave Raiders called The White Whistlers, she's shocked to discover her mother has pledged to wait for her at the *bottom* of the Abyss. Luckily, she doesn't have to make the journey alone – on the outskirts of the Abyss she finds an amnesiac boy named Reg, who possesses robotic powers. Rico and Reg set out on the adventure of a lifetime to discover the secrets of the Abyss, and to reunite with Lyza!

The collector's edition Blu-ray set of the series will be released on 25 February from MVM Entertainment, so it won't be long before you can take the journey right along with them.

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WORDS BY DAVID WEST



EVANGELION!

Netflix Secures The Anime Classic

NETFLIX HAS REVEALED, via Twitter, that the streaming service has secured the rights to the legendary anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. First aired in Japan in 1995 and directed by Hideaki Anno, the show won critical and popular acclaim as it reimagined the giant robot format by introducing religious references, teenage angst, and themes of mental illness. At the centre of the story is Shinji Akari, summoned by his estranged father to pilot a gigantic, sentient Evangelion unit in order to defend the planet against hostile invaders known as Angels. Unlike the plucky mecha pilots of earlier giant robot shows like *Mazinger Z* and *Brave Raideen*, Shinji Akari is a neurotic mess and every battle against the Angels is an exercise in terror and pain, so it's not the cheeriest series you'll ever see. Netflix will stream the full 26-episode original run and the movie sequels *Death & Rebirth* and *The End Of Evangelion* in the spring of 2019.

In related news, Netflix has announced that a live action series based on Shinichiro Watanabe's *Cowboy Bebop* is in the works. The original is the story of interplanetary bounty hunters Spike Spiegel, Jet Black, Faye Valentine and Ed. The show will run for ten episodes, the first of which will be scripted by Christopher Yost who wrote *Thor: Ragnarok*. The showrunners will include Andre Nemec and Josh Appelbaum, of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Out Of The Shadows*, and Jeff Pinker of *Lost* and *Alias*, while Watanabe is listed as series consultant.



EARLY KOREAN CINEMA AT BFI

Rediscovering a lost legacy

In February the BFI teams up with the Korean Cultural Centre UK for a season of films under the banner *Early Korean Cinema: Lost Films from the Japanese Colonial Period*. It had long been thought that nothing survived from Korea's time under Japanese rule, but the Korean Film Archive has found and restored several works created from the period. The series begins on 7 February with the oldest surviving Korean film, *Crossroads Of Youth* from 1934. The line-up covers everything from melodramas like *Sweet Dreams* and *Fisherman's Fire*, to propaganda films produced for the occupation like *Military Train* and *Volunteer*. 1941's *Spring Of The Korean Peninsula* is about an adaptation of the famous pansori (a form of musical storytelling) *Chunghyang*, while 1946's *Hurrah! For Freedom* was the first film made after the end of the occupation. Visit bfi.org.uk for more.



BEFORE WE VANISH

Aliens Amongst Us

Arrow Films has revealed that they will be releasing Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *Before We Vanish* in cinemas this spring. The film takes a classic sci-fi premise about a trio of aliens, the vanguard of a larger invasion force, who arrive on Earth and take possession of human bodies. The twist is that the aliens seek to understand mankind by absorbing their knowledge and values, which are stripped from the human subjects in the process, leaving them without any understanding of concepts like ownership and work. It's science fiction with social commentary! The cast includes Masami Nagasawa, from the live action *Bleach*, Ryuhei Matsuda of *Nana* and *The Raid 2*, and Hiroki Hasegawa from *Shin Godzilla*. Stay tuned for a release date.

UK release schedule



ANIME

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
17/12	Cowboy Bebop Ultimate Edition (Blu-ray)	Anime Limited
14/01	Naruto Shippuden 35	Manga
14/01	Dragon Ball Z Broly Trilogy	Manga
21/01	Vampire Princess Miyu Collection	MVM
28/01	Dragon Ball Super Part 6 (DVD, Blu-ray)	Manga
28/01	Maquia: When the Promised Flower Blooms	Anime Limited
28/01	Chaos Dragon	Anime Limited
28/01	No Game No Life: Zero (Blu-ray)	MVM
28/01	When They Cry Series 1 Collection (Blu-ray)	MVM
04/02	MFZ (DVD, Blu-ray)	Manga
04/02	Armed Girls Machiavellism (Blu-ray)	MVM
11/02	The Ancient Magus Bride (Combo)	Manga
11/02	Card Captor Sakura Clear Card (Combo)	Manga
11/02	Power Rangers Ninja Steel 3	Manga
11/02	When They Cry: Kai S2 Collection (Blu-ray)	MVM
18/02	Princess Principal Collector's Edition (Blu-ray)	MVM
25/02	Vatican Miracle Examiner (Blu-ray)	MVM
25/02	Made in Abyss (Collector's Blu-ray)	MVM
March	Naruto Shippuden Complete Series 9	Manga
04/03	When They Cry: Rei S3 Collection (Blu-ray)	MVM
04/03	Grimoire of Zero Collection (DVD, Blu-ray)	MVM
11/03	Scum's Wish Collection (Blu-ray)	MVM
18/03	STARMYU 1 (Blu-ray)	MVM



MANGA

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
20/12	Aho-Girl: A Clueless Girl 10	Kodansha
20/12	Battle Angel Alita Mars Chronicle 5	Kodansha

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
20/12	Tokyo Tarareba Girls 4	Kodansha
20/12	Koimonogatari	Vertical
24/12	ARTWORKS 04 bunnybee artworks and illustrations	ESCHATOLOGY
25/12	Infini-T Force Volume 4	Udon
26/12	To The Abandoned Sacred Beasts 7	Vertical
26/12	Danganronpa 2: Ultimate Luck and Hope and Despair Volume 1	Dark Horse
27/12	Missions Of Love 16	Kodansha
27/12	Clockwork Planet 9	Kodansha
27/12	Fire Force 13	Kodansha
27/12	Love And Lies 9	Kodansha
10/01	20th Century Boys: The Perfect Edition 02	VIZ Media
10/01	Abara: Complete Deluxe Edition	VIZ Media
10/01	After Hours 3	VIZ Media
10/01	Ao Haru Ride Vol 02	Shojo Beat
10/01	Fullmetal Alchemist: Fullmetal Edition 3	VIZ Media
10/01	Dragon Quest Illustrations: 30th Anniversary Edition	VIZ Media
10/01	Escape Journey 2	Sublime
10/01	Golden Kamuy 07	VIZ Media
10/01	Legend of the Galactic Heroes 08	Haikasoru
10/01	Pokémon the Movie: I Choose You!	VIZ Media
10/01	Queen's Quality 6	Shojo Beat
10/01	Sleepy Princess in the Demon Castle 4	VIZ Media
10/01	Splatoon 5	VIZ Media
10/01	Takane & Hana 06	Shojo Beat
10/01	Ten Count 6	Sublime
10/01	The Young Master's Revenge vol 4	Shojo Beat
10/01	Yona of the Dawn 15	Shojo Beat
24/01	Blue Exorcist Vol. 21	VM Shonen Jump Advanced
24/01	Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba 04	Shonen Jump
24/01	Dr. Stone Vol 3	Shonen Jump
24/01	Dragon Ball Super 4	Shonen Jump
24/01	Haikyuu!! 30	Shonen Jump
24/01	Kaguya-sama: Love is War 06	Shonen Jump
24/01	My Hero Academia Vigilantes 03	Shonen Jump



ASIAN FILM

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
24/12	Paradox	Universal Pictures
21/01	Iceman: The Time Traveller	Cine Asia
28/01	Battle Creek Brawl	88 Films
28/01	Bleeding Steel	Universal Pictures
28/01	One Cut Of The Dead	Third Window Films
01/02	Burning	Thunderbird Releasing
06/02	Alita: Battle Angel	20th Century Fox
11/02	Snake And Crane Arts Of Shaolin	88 Films
25/02	Mifune: The Last Samurai	BFI
01/03	Of Love & Law	Hakawati
01/03	Ringu	Arrow Films
25/03	Shoplifters	Thunderbird Releasing
31/05	Godzilla: King Of Monsters	Warner Bros

NEO'S TOPTEN

Our roundup of the hottest tracks currently
blasting on the office stereo

1 DAY6 – CHOCOLATE 25 JANUARY!

K-pop band DAY6 have added a European leg to their first world tour! The quintet have already been touring the globe since the summer of 2018, and will begin the new year with a string of dates on this side of the planet, including London on 25 January at O2 Kentish Town Forum – tickets are on sale now.

The band originally formed as a quintet in 2014 under the name of 5LIVE, but switched to DAY6 when sixth member DoWoon joined on drums the following year. They released their debut EP *THE DAY* in 2015 and reached number two with it in the Billboard World Albums chart. The success led to media dubbing them as one of *the* acts redefining K-pop, mostly due to each member playing their own instrument. That same year saw one of the founding members leave and 6DAY continue as a five piece, consisting of guitarist and rapper Jae, leader and guitarist SungJin, bassist and rapper Young K, synth and keyboard tinkers WonPil and DoWoon.

Since then DAY6 have released their first full length album, a greatest hits, their first batch of Japanese singles and two further EPs, including *Shoot Me: Youth, Part 1*, released at the start of this world tour. As this issue hits the shops they'll have released fourth EP *Youth, Part 2*, titled *Remember Us*.

Chocolate is one of their latest releases and is filled with summer-like vibes. It's also part of the sound track to Korean school flick *Want More 19*.

LONDON DATE!



FIRST UK APPEARANCE!



2 MARY'S BLOOD – WORLD'S END 4, 5 OCTOBER!

Something exciting is afoot at the O2 Academy Islington in London later in 2019. Scheduled to take place between Friday 4 and Saturday 5 of October is METAL MATSURI, an all-Japanese heavy metal festival that promises to bring ten bands' worth of entertainment over two days.

So far only the headline acts have been announced; the mighty Mary's Blood and Unlucky Morpheus, both female fronted forces of metal. This will be Mary's Blood's first time to perform in the UK, despite being signed to JPU Records, while Unlucky Morpheus vocalist Fuki previously visited London as a solo artist to perform at HYPER JAPAN. She's also a member of DOLL\$BOXX.

Tickets go on sale from 14 December through Eventbrite and TicketMaster, with two options available; a two-day pass priced at £100, and day entry for £65 plus fees. There will also be a VIP upgrade available which will include a pre-party on Thursday 3 October at The Underbelly, Hoxton.

Follow organisers Orion Live on social media for more details as they break! They've also told us that the whole event will be hosted by none-other than beardy-tutu wearer LADYBEARD! Definitely one to watch.

MANCHESTER AND LONDON SHOWS!



3 MAN WITH A MISSION – HEY NOW 27, 28 FEBRUARY

Fuzzy rockers MAN WITH A MISSION are back in Blighty for a two-date stint as part of their 2019 European tour! The wolf-boy hybrids kick off the tour on Wednesday 27 February at Manchester's Academy 3, followed by London's ULU the next day before jetting off for shows in Germany, France and Russia.

The tour follows the release of their most recent single, *Hey Now*, the latest track to be taken from their current album, *Chasing the Horizon*, out now. The album is their fifth in Japan but their first to be released worldwide.

MAN WITH A MISSION sell out arenas back home in Japan and have also completed sold out headline tours of the UK, Europe and US. The quintet played their latest sold-out headline London show in 2018 to an ecstatic crowd at The Dome in Tufnell Park, and also toured the UK with local rock heroes Don Broco. Tickets are on sale now for around £15.

UK TOUR!



4 YAMATO DRUMMERS OF JAPAN – GAMUSHARA

16 FEB – 31 MARCH

Since forming in 1993 Nara's Yamato drum squad have gone on to give over 2,500 performances in 51 countries and regions. These days the troupe spend around six to ten months touring the world – and from this February one month of that will be spent in the UK! The Yamato Drummers of Japan will be performing in Milton Keynes, Liverpool, York, Coventry, Stoke-on-Trent, Torquay, Oxford, Folkstone, Birmingham and Sunderland between 16 February and 8 March, with tickets on sale now from £13. Then, from 12–21 March they will take up a residency at London's Peacock Theatre.

5 JOJI HIROTA AND THE LONDON TAIKO DRUMMERS 9 MARCH

More Taiko action heading our way, this time from a group that was established a decade before the Yamato Drummers; Joji Hirota and the London Taiko Drums! Formed in the early '80s, the group has grown to be a highly regarded and well established Japanese traditional and contemporary taiko drumming troupe – they even opened the Live Earth concert at Wembley Stadium as part of SOS Allstars, a one-off supergroup led by the drummers of Queen, Red Hot Chili Peppers and Foo Fighters. Tickets for Joji Hirota and the London Taiko Drummers' next London show, at St. Mary's Church in Putney, London, are on sale now priced at £12.50.

6 TK FROM LING TOSITE SIGURE – KATHARSIS OUT NOW!

From the moment we heard the *Psycho Pass* opening song *abnormalize* by ling tosite sigure, we were in love. Since then frontman TK has started his own project, thoughtfully named "TK from ling tosite sigure", but there's little doubt which TK is behind the tunes when you hear them. We'd recognise his distinctive high vocals and manic guitar style anywhere! You might've heard it too, his track *Unravel* became popular when used as the opening to *Tokyo Ghoul*. Latest single *katharsis* is out now digitally and used in *Tokyo Ghoul:re*. We particularly like the trippy music video!

NEW SINGLE!



7 SUNWOOK KIM – CHOPIN BARCAROLLE JANUARY AND MAY

One of the finest pianists of his generation is Korean born Sunwook Kim. He has a string of shows coming up all over Europe, with four confirmed for the UK. The first takes place on Tuesday 8 January at Wigmore Hall in central London, where he's due to recite works from Mozart, Beethoven, Shin and Chopin. He'll return in May to perform the Dvorak Piano Concerto alongside the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra in Poole on the 8th, Portsmouth on the 9th, and Stoke-on-Trent on the 10th.

NEW SINGLE! NEW ALBUM!



8 ONE OK ROCK – STAND OUT FIT IN 15 FEBRUARY

ONE OK ROCK are back with a new single, new music video and details of their upcoming album! Entitled *Eye of the Storm*, the new album will be released overseas via label Fueled by Ramen on 15 February. It's set to have 13 tracks, including *Eye of the Storm*, latest single and music video *Stand Out Fit In*, and a track called *In The Stars* which will feature Kiara, the same guest vocalist who appeared on Linkin Park's 2017 track *Heavy*.

9 LOVEBITES – PLEDGE OF THE SAVIOUR 18 JANUARY

Powermetal heroines LOVEBITES are back! Well, they never really went away, releasing three CDs within the space of nine months and visiting the UK on four separate occasions! They just finished their first European tour too and are now preparing for the release of sophomore album *CLOCKWORK IMMORTALITY*, on CD from JPU Records on 18 January.

NEW ALBUM!



LONDON DATE!



10 JUPITER – THEORY OF EVOLUTION 12 MAY

Visual metallers Jupiter just announced a European tour, including a UK date on 12 May! No other details have been announced yet, including no details on which venue they will perform in, but the band did leave us this message; "This is the first tour with our new vocalist KUZE and it is also the first time to play in Europe for Daisuke and Rucy. We will make it a blast! We will impress all metalheads in Europe."



GONE FISHING

NEO'S RESIDENT IDOL CATCHES HER OWN DINNER IN TOKYO

LET'S GO FISHING! I would like to introduce you to a fun dining experience that you can enjoy even in the middle of Tokyo. It's a chain of restaurants called Zauo and they have branches in Shibuya, Meguro and Shinjuku – the latter one is in the same building as the Shinjuku Washington Hotel, very useful if you're staying there! Be warned though, only Meguro's branch accepts advance reservation and it's also the easiest to find from the station.

First you'll need to rent a fishing rod for 108 yen (around 75p), then it's time to catch your food! Be careful, you must pay for whatever you catch – so make sure you catch the one you want! The cheapest fish is around £7 – it's very reasonable! I found it difficult to fish by myself however it was soooo exciting and fun!! It was my first time to go fishing. If you're the same as me, I recommend speaking to staff for advice and techniques.

Once you've caught your dinner, it's time to call the staff and select your cooking method. You can choose two styles. I selected sashimi (raw and sliced) and sautéed in butter. Some of the other options include zousui (porridge of rice and vegetables), miso soup and fried fish. The different kinds of fish you can catch include abalone, sea bream, Japanese spiny lobster, scampi and horse mackerel.

I was so glad to eat the raw fish which I caught. It gave me a feeling of accomplishment, eating something I managed to catch. When you catch something too everyone will clap and cheer! It's exciting! A lot of Japanese companies use this place for their office banquet. It's fun, isn't it! If you come to Japan and try this place, let me know about your experience on Instagram (@mahiru104) or Twitter (@lunch_mahiru).



LOVERBITES

BEST NEW BAND

METAL HAMMER GOLDEN GODS AWARDS



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ME RI KU RI SU MA SU!

Mark Guthrie explains the lights, sex, and deep-fried chicken of Japanese Christmas

IN EACH COUNTRY in which I have lived I have found Christmas increasingly more magnificent than the last. From chopping down my own tree in a snowy American forest, barbecuing on an Australian beach, to getting steaming drunk in a steamy sauna in a Swedish log cabin, Christmases just got better and better. And then I came to Japan...

Of course, there are some things that are very much the same: Mariah Carey is still very much inescapable and shopping centres still sport great big fir trees. However, some things are just plain wrong, such as being expected to work on Christmas Day. (I'm sure Jesus wouldn't have stood for that. Unless, of course, you work in a pub; JC was, as the Bible notes, well acquainted with wine-bibbers.)

And then there are things that are just plain weird.

CHRISTMAS? THAT'S OLD NEWS

Unlike other western traditions such as Halloween and Valentine's Day, Christmas has been celebrated in Japan in some fashion for almost 570 years. In 1549, the Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier arrived in Kagoshima and succeeded in converting many of the locals to Christianity, and from there the religion spread, though with limited success.

However, after taking control of Japan in bloody battle, Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, who had tolerated Christians due to the arms he bought from Portuguese and Spanish traders, became increasingly suspicious of the religion, seeing it as a challenge to his authority as a ruler: you should offer your life to your shogun, not some bearded *gaijin* [foreigner]. As a result, he banned Christianity, and the religion, as well as the celebration of Christmas, went underground and virtually disappeared from the increasingly isolated nation. That is until, as many Japanese believe, another bearded *gaijin* reignited the festive fever.

KENTUCKY /S FOR CHRISTMAS. REALLY!

When I first came to Japan a friend of mine told me that Japanese ate Kentucky Fried Chicken on Christmas Day. Quite understandably I thought he was winding me up. And then, one October day (yes, it's not just at home where Christmas starts early) I walked past a KFC to see the Colonel Sanders statue dressed as Father Christmas. While the Colonel makes a pretty good Santa – the beard isn't anywhere near bushy enough, but it's a pretty good likeness nonetheless – I was shocked to see that my mate wasn't taking the mick after all.

Apparently, sometime in the 1970s, a *gaijin* family were looking for a traditional turkey dinner and wandered into KFC as a last resort. This story spread to the chicken emporium's hierarchy, and a legend was born, spawning TV commercials announcing, 'Kentucky for Christmas'. Today, on the days leading up to Christmas, queues outside KFCs up and down the land reach down their respective streets, and it is so ingrained in the public's psyche that if you try telling the locals 'actually, we eat turkey rather than fried chicken on Christmas day', they flat-out don't believe you.

IT'S CHRISTMAS CAKE, JIM, BUT NOT AS WE KNOW IT

I love Christmas cake so much that every year my Auntie Mary makes an extra one and sends it to me in the post at great expense (the amount of brandy

within must weigh half a pound alone). When I tell my Japanese friends this they are incredulous: "but we have Christmas cake here too!" they cry. "No, no you don't," I reply.

Japanese Christmas cake is essentially a sponge cake topped with cream and strawberries, and usually has a cute character on top. And while that is pleasant enough (though not a patch on Auntie Mary's) there is a sinister aspect to these cakes in the way the term 'Christmas cake' has been attached to a certain demographic of Japanese women. Actually, that sounds quite nice: light, sweet and *kawaii*, right? Wrong. It comes from the fact that any Christmas cake that remains on the shelf after December 25 is heavily discounted and unwanted. Much like unmarried women over the age of 25, apparently. (NB: Not my opinion AT ALL!!)

CHRISTMAS IS ABOUT LOVE HOTELS, ACTUALLY

While through most of the Christian world Christmas is about getting together with your family, in Japan Christmas is a time for couples, particularly young lovers. Although many Japanese today put the recent popularity of Christmas down to the Kentucky for Christmas ad campaign, the holiday actually made its resurgence following WWII, returned to the attention of the general public by movies imported by the occupying American forces.

Now, many of these Christmas movies tended to have a romantic bent to them, and the Japanese as a result equated the holiday season with a time of love. It's not surprising, really. As Isaac Meyer from the fantastic History of Japan podcast puts it, "imagine your only understanding of Christmas was based on the movie *Love, Actually*." You'd think it was all about hooking up (and perhaps trying to seduce your best mate's wife), wouldn't you? Because of this, in Japan Christmas is equated with romance, love and, ultimately, sex. It is the busiest time of year for the country's love hotels, at which couples can stay for a couple of hours to, well, how should I put it...? We won't go until we've got some? Come all ye faithful? Fa-la-la-la-laaa-la-la-la-ooooohh?

IT'S AN ILLUMINATING TIME OF YEAR

Okay, not everyone is knocking boots in Hotel Christmases up and down the land, but many still want to get involved in the romance that is, apparently, inherent in the Christmas season. For these people, there are the illuminations.

Of course, at home we have our towns lit up for the festive occasion, going as far as having someone who used to be in Steps or on *Big Brother* turn on the lights. But Japan, when it comes to illuminations, goes wild. Pretty much every big city will have special areas that are a cacophony of lights, with themes and projection mapping. Where I live, there are huge gardens that are aglow, with a centrepiece of a flickering symbol of Mt. Fuji changing colours for the seasons and, for some reason I have never understood, the mascot for Kumamoto Prefecture, Kumamon, climbing it.

Whatever the reason, it is hugely popular with young romantics, and you can't move for couples wandering around hand in hand. Literally can't move for them, as it's so popular that for the entire month of December the places are jam-packed. Personally, I prefer the solitude of the love hotels.



1

Photo by Gemma Cox



2

Photo by Mark Guthrie



3

Photo by Manami Farrow

1. The festive foyer at the Grand Hyatt Tokyo. 2. Colonel San(ta) ders. 3. Christmas Cakes don't come more kawaii than this! 4. Linda-chan taking in the Christmas lights. 5. Couples enjoy the illuminations at Mie Prefecture's Nabana no Sato.



4

Photo by Takuya Shimada



5

Photo by Takuya Shimada

WE LOVE THIS STUFF!

Check out NEO's pick of the coolest merchandise around this month



1. NYAN JEWEL CAT JEWELLERY AND GUM BLIND BOX

For £4.99 at www.tofucute.com, you can bag a blind boxed piece of cute cat jewellery plus a piece of bubble gum. There are 17 types to collect including rings, clip-on earrings and necklaces!

2. GENKI GEAR DESIGNS

D&D fans will love this The Dice Are Not Your Friends tee from GenkiGear.com for £10. We also love the quirky sense of humour in their Catmilk tee in the limited edition range for £17. Or, pick up the awesome Chemically Inert tee in blue, charcoal and purple for £16!

3. AN ARMCHAIR TRAVELLER'S HISTORY OF TOKYO

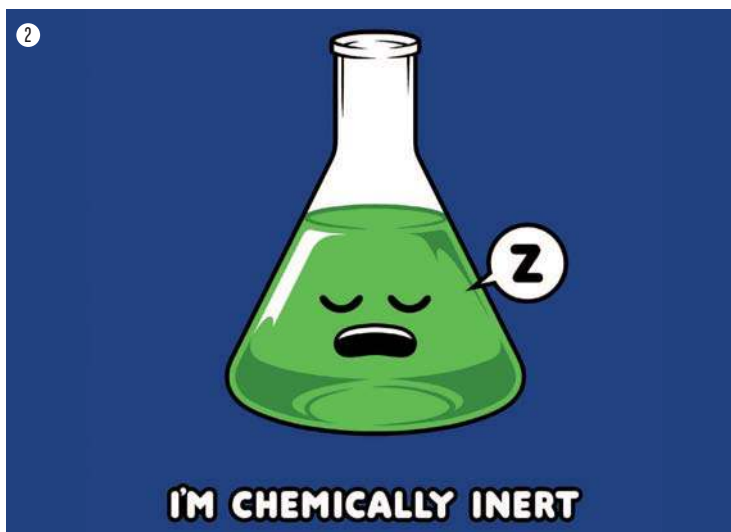
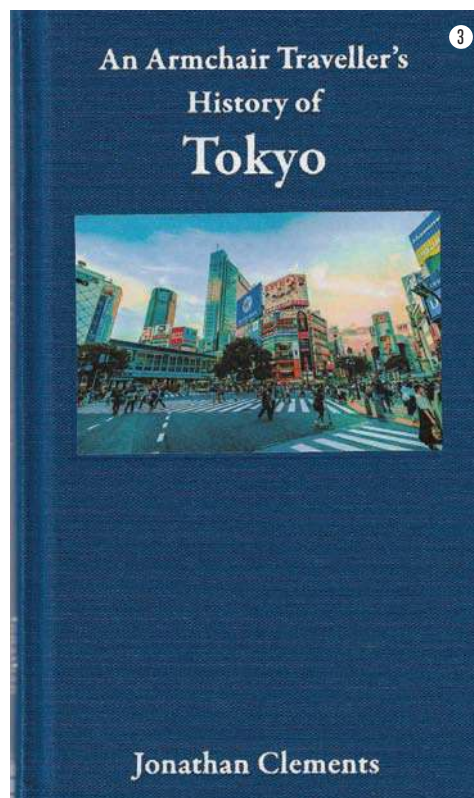
From our esteemed writer Jonathan Clements comes this pocket-sized jaunt through the history of Japan's capital, from its ancient origins all the way through to its Olympic bid. Fascinating stuff - £12.99 from publishers bookHaus.

4. POKÉMON RE-MENT

We absolutely love Re-Ment, and this adorable Pokémon series features teeny miniatures (from tea sets to mochi!) blind-boxed in a series of eight from £7.50 to £8.50, available at www.tofucute.com.

5. CARDFIGHT!! VANGUARD EXTRA BOOSTER 03: ULTRARARE MIRACLE COLLECTION

Available from your local friendly game shop (findyourgamestore.co.uk) for £3.99, each pack contains a selection of seven cards from a possible choice of 66 types, and featured clans include Gold Paladin, Angel Feather, and Neo Nectar!



WE LOVE THIS STUFF!

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HONG KONG COOL

Emily Lovell takes you on a tour of an incredible destination!

WHY NOT DITCH the icy cold temperatures and last minute scramble for a turkey this Christmas and head to Hong Kong instead? Aside from being way warmer than the UK and packed full of fun attractions, it's also filled with endless glitzy shopping malls and bustling night markets. Christmas shopping with a difference! Immortalised in many a movie, Hong Kong is a city of contrasts, with futuristic cityscapes just a stone's throw away from traditional temples. If you're lucky enough to get the chance to head to this sprawling metropolis then you're sure to find something to float your boat!

MEET BRUCE LEE

Okay, you won't meet the real Bruce Lee when you visit Hong Kong, but there's no better city in the world to get to know him! Head to the Bruce Lee Museum where you can spend hours gazing at memorabilia or visit Avenue of Stars where you'll find a bronze statue of the man himself.

THEME PARK FUN

If your idea of fun is to spend the day hanging out with Disney characters or riding a hair-raising roller coaster, then Hong Kong is the place for you! Embrace your inner child by heading to Disneyland or take a trip down memory lane by visiting the teeny (but very cute) Snoopy's World. Ocean Park is fun if you're looking for thrill rides – with the added bonus of sea creatures galore.

SEE 10,000 BUDDHAS

The temple with 10,000 Buddhas is a sight not to be missed. You'll climb a long, steep, winding path, passing Buddha after golden Buddha, each one

slightly different from the next. When you reach the top your efforts will be rewarded with an impressive and ornate temple complex complete with smouldering incense, a monkey or two and yes... even more Buddha statues!

MAGICAL MACAU

Hop on a ferry to Macau, where crazy big casino hotels await you. Take flight with Batman in Studio City's DC Comics inspired hotel, splash around in the water park at the glittery Galaxy Hotel, or head to The Venetian, where you can take a gondola ride through a shopping mall. Macau isn't called the Vegas of China for nothing!

COOL CAFES

Hong Kong has lots of popular cute and quirky theme cafes. Stuff your face with Hello Kitty dim sum, take tea with rabbits, get your Harry Potter fix at the 9 & 3/4 Cafe or browse through Ease Cafe's 5000+ comic collection. You can even eat dinner whilst go-karting. Just make sure you let your food go down first!

SHOP TIL YOU DROP

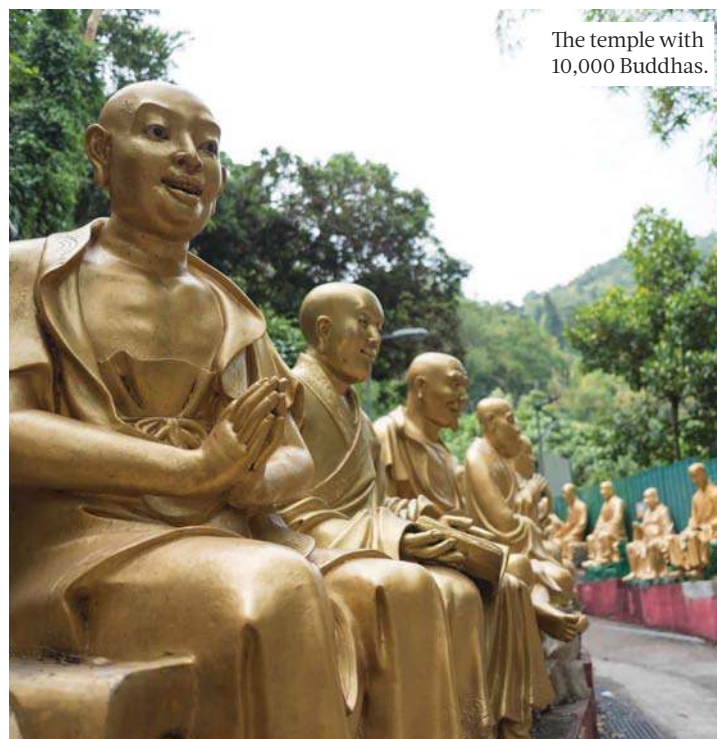
Hong Kong is the city of never-ending shopping malls, and in true Hong Kong style they're extravagant and huge, crammed full of attractions ranging from an ice rink to a 1600 capacity cinema! There's even a mall in the shape of a cruise ship if you like a spot of the unusual with your shopping spree.

AFTER DARK

Hong Kong by night takes on a whole new personality; when the sun (and the temperatures) go down, the lights go up. Wandering the streets after dark is like



The Avenue of Stars is home to a bronze statue of Bruce Lee.



The temple with 10,000 Buddhas.



The water park at The Galaxy.

entering a neon wonderland, and cruising the night markets is a fun alternative to shopping at the pristine and fancy shopping malls. Grab a bite to eat at a street food stall or haggle the night away.

VIEW FROM THE TOP

If you're not afraid of heights, then you've got to experience one of Hong Kong's star attractions; Victoria Peak. Pack your camera, join the crowds and take a steep tram ride up to the peak's lofty heights. From here the views are incredible. This is surely one of the most photographed vistas in Hong Kong, and for good reason!

LET BATTLE COMMENCE

Rainy day? No problem. Hong Kong is jam packed with fun and physical indoor activities to keep you entertained. Shoot virtual zombies at Sandbox VR, battle with light sabers at Crossfire Arena – or if you really want to let off some steam, you can even pay to smash things up with a baseball bat at Ikari Area.

SOARING SKYSCRAPERS

If the temps are a little too toasty you'll often find that you can stay cool in the shade of a huge skyscraper. With heights reaching over 100 metres these impressive buildings tower over the city! Chances are that wherever you are you'll be able to spot a building (or ten) looming in the background.

PARK LIFE

If you've overdone the sightseeing and need to take some time out, then head to one of Hong Kong's peaceful parks and gardens. One of the most interesting (and



Hong Kong Park.

photogenic) is Hong Kong Park with palm trees and ponds creating a bit of an oasis in the middle of the urban jungle. It also boasts a large tropical 'rainforest' with over 80 species of birds!

If all that has whetted your appetite for travel, head to page 064 for our NEO New Year's Resolution: a guide to visiting Tokyo in 2019! ●

CLASH OF THE TITANS

JONATHAN CLEMENTS ON HOW YOU NEED TO FAIL BEFORE YOU SUCCEED

One of the benefits of an ever-expanding media world is how diligently people will scrape the bottom of the barrel in search of fan collectibles. That's the only reason I can think of for Kodansha's recent decision to publish the original one-shot *Humans versus Giants* manga by Hajime Isayama, which was rejected in 2006 for *Weekly Shonen Jump* magazine. The story, of course, would eventually transform into the best-selling *Attack on Titan* series, but it would take another three years before it saw the light of day in its improved version.

Humanity versus Giants just isn't very good. It's got a naff title and shoddy artwork, and even if it did contain the seeds of Isayama's famous worldwide mega-hit, there is every chance that publishing it in *Shonen Jump* would have ruined it. If it had appeared in *Shonen Jump*, it would have been obliged to pander to that magazine's readership demographic, which could have turned it into a bunch of fight-of-the-week nonsense and wittering about power-ups and friendship. It would have lost its gorier violence, and the teenage Isayama would have been crammed into a break-neck weekly schedule that might have pushed him way too far, way too early.

"IF THERE'S ANYTHING TO TAKE AWAY FROM THE DREDGING UP OF THIS BIN-END, IT'S HOW RIGHT *WEEKLY SHONEN JUMP* WAS TO REJECT IT, AND HOW PERCEPTIVE THE SAME PUBLISHER WAS TO AWARD IT A "FINE WORK" PRIZE IN A MANGA COMPETITION SCANT MONTHS LATER."

Even if it had flourished in the *Jump* environment, turning out more like one of the more mature *Jump* strips like *Death Note*, one wonders to what extent Isayama would have been able to make his own creative decisions. At such a young age, he would have been obliged to do whatever his editors told him, and without the backing to hire assistants, he would have struggled to meet his deadlines alone. I wonder if it would have lasted through the year, instead of enduring as the 25-volume, world-beating blockbuster it has become.

If there's anything to take away from the dredging up of this bin-end, it's how right *Weekly Shonen Jump* was to reject it, and how perceptive the same publisher was to



© HAJIME ISAYAMA, KODANSHA



1. While it lacks the polish of his later work, *Humans versus Giants* contains many rough ideas that would make their way into *Attack on Titan*. 2. The one-shot proves the old adage: if at first you don't succeed, try, and try again!

award it a "Fine Work" prize in a manga competition scant months later. It's easy to sit in your armchair and scoff at some kid's crappy comic. It's world-class clever to somehow see in it the potential to be something truly successful, and to decide to help that teenager become the creator they deserve to be. So don't be downhearted if your humans are off-model and your shading's iffy. Keep at it and don't give up. ●

DO NOT LOOK TO THE DICE
TO SAVE YOU



THEY ARE NOT YOUR FRIENDS



SCIENCE CAT



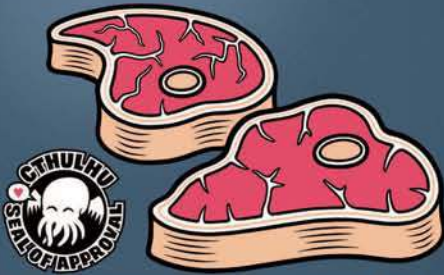
CALLING ALL
MAGIC-USERS!
USE CAUTION
WHEN CASTING
AREA OF EFFECT SPELLS
IN CONFINED DUNGEON
ENVIRONMENTS!

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FOR THE PROMOTION OF THE
BLEEDING OBVIOUS



Cthulhu's
Meaty Cuttlets

Totally tasty treat
Definitely not human, honest!



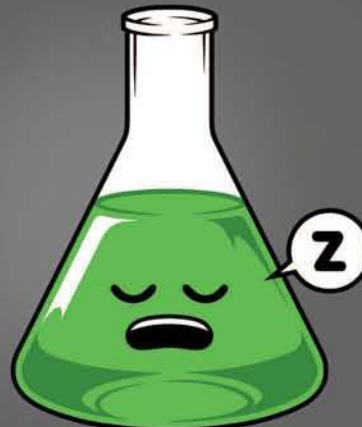
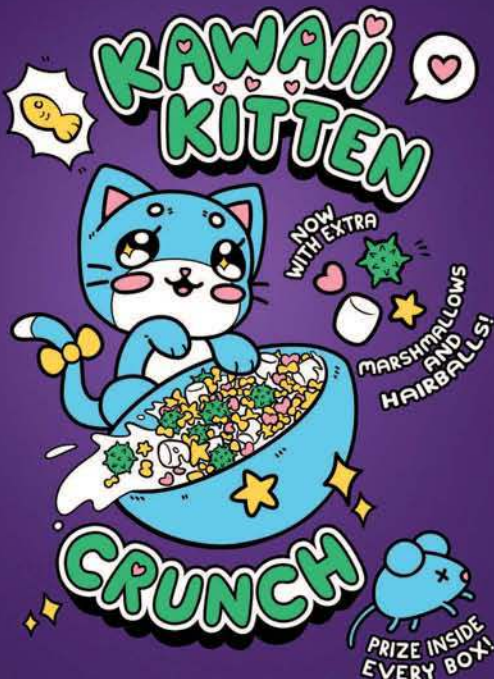
Did someone say 'human flesh'?
It wasn't us, perish the thought!

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Tiny ball of
Incandescent
rage



I'M CHEMICALLY INERT



I'm full of
bad ideas



[ANIME REVIEW]

KABANERI OF THE IRON FORTRESS

Attack on Titan's steampunk cousin

OUT NOW // MANGA ENTERTAINMENT // 15 // ACTION, HORROR, SCI-FI
// £34.99 (BLU-RAY/DVD COMBO) // 275 MINS // 12 EPISODES

PLOT In a country resembling long-ago Japan, but with giant steam trains, humanity is threatened by ravening sub-human flesh-eaters called Kabane, whose victims become Kabane themselves...

The runaway train came down the track, whistle wide and throttle back, a battering ram hurtling through a steampunk old-world Japan with the guts of a thousand zombies plastered on its whistling, screeching flanks.

The show may call them “Kabane,” but we know zombies when we see them, though these are unusually cool zombies with livid shining veins, snarly faces, acrobat skills and human cunning. Early on, the zombie-fied – okay, Kabane-fied – dad of one of the main characters, still wearing his elegant feudal robe, stands on the track as the train bears down, leering as it smashes him. “Father...” a distraught woman whispers. “No,” says her grim-faced samurai protector, “that was only a Kabane.”

It's a great B-movie moment and *Kabaneri*, in its first and best half, is a terrific action B-movie in TV anime, with glowing production values to present its primitive plot from a child's imagination. (Much of the story could have been dreamed by Kun, the train-loving toddler in *Mirai*.) Barely 15 minutes in, the Kabane send their own train flying

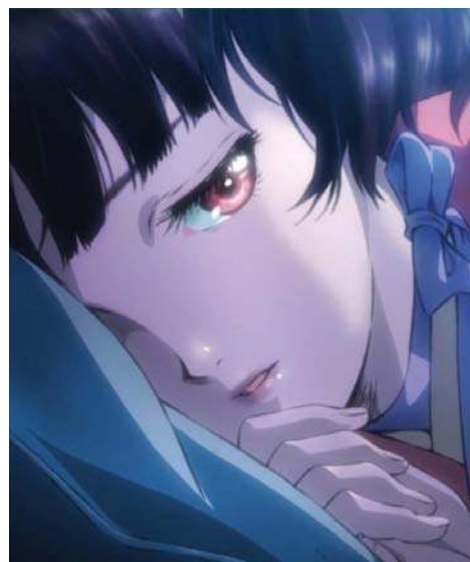
and crashing onto a town from a Kurosawa period drama, all wooden buildings and flaming torches; its people have juggernaut trains but no cars or TVs. Then the Kabane lurch from the night and rip into the humans and the show begins to sprint on adrenaline, feeding its stock characters through wringers with gusto.

Our hero is Ikoma, a good-looking adult nerd (you can tell by the spectacles) who's been frantically inventing countermeasures against the horde. He fights a Kabane and gets bit, which should mean game over. But he stops himself going Kabane by using one of his workshop machines to three-quarters throttle himself – don't try this at home, kids – and stopping the infection reaching his brain. That leaves him, like many other anime heroes, between human and monster worlds. He's now a “Kabaneri” with handy-dandy powers, not least being able to shrug off Kabane bites, but with the prospect of tipping into full mindless Kabane-hood in time. Naturally, his former neighbours fear him and throw him off the runaway train to die. Equally naturally, he's snatched back up by a kick-ass girl stranger, Mumei, who's a Kabaneri too. Despite their murderously suspicious fellow passengers, Mumei starts teaching Ikoma anti-Kabane fighting skills as the train ploughs onward, seeking any haven in Hell.

You may have heard that *Kabaneri* shares tons of credits with *Attack on Titan*, including director Tetsuro Araki, production studio Wit and (very obviously) musician Hiroyuki Sawano. But for its first half Kabane blasts through the “it's a copy of *Titan*” accusations with the same cheerful vigour

TALENT

One of *Kabaneri*'s main assets is its frankly glamorous character designs by Haruchiko Mikimoto, famed for his work on the *Macross* franchise, as well as the girls-in-space epic *Gunbuster*.



with which it mows down Xeroxed zombies. This is, we repeat, anime's answer to a B-film; when you have speed and crushing momentum, who needs originality? Yes, there are plain points of contact with *Titan*, especially in the first episodes. Hands up if you saw the train bashing through the town's walls at the start and wondered if it was the Colossal Titan's day off. Scenes of the petite Mumei kicking in a recalcitrant Ikoma feel like a cross-series joke about Eren and Mikasa's comparable relationship in *Titan*. But such irreverent homage is what a smart B-film does; the same goes for *Kabaneri*'s obvious steals from umpteen other anime.

"KABANERI'S FIRST HALF IS A TERRIFIC ACTION B-MOVIE IN TV ANIME; THEN THERE'S A SERIOUS LOSS OF STEAM."

Broadcast two years after *Titan*'s first season, *Kabaneri* doesn't stoke up its "parent" show's levels of teen fury or other exploding emotions; nothing in *Kabaneri* has the force of Mikasa bawling her head off in *Titan* part eight. But what *Kabaneri* does have is several fabulously staged and animated action set-pieces, far surpassing most of first-season *Titan*, and mercifully skipping over anime's hair-tearing habit of freezing fights in time so that characters can swap strategy-chat. By halfway, *Kabaneri* has garnered a ridiculous amount

of punch-the-air moments and viewer goodwill... which it squanders terribly in its second half.

Perhaps that's harsh, but for a show full of characters exhorting each other to stoke up the power, *Kabaneri* has a serious loss of steam midway through. There are lesser action scenes, with patchier animation and unclear continuity; Mumei switches from an engagingly conflicted heroine to a plain dumb one; there are silly story stratagems to separate and unite characters; and a grimmer tone, with a stress on human cruelty, that doesn't gel with the high-speed pulp we've been watching till now, nor with the still-cartoony characters.

A newly-introduced villain looks cool, but he's played too straight; as an all-purpose madman with daddy issues, he sorely needs more eye-rolling and scene-chewing. Two issues ago in NEO, we discussed *Titan*'s new season, and the challenge of switching a people-vs-monsters show over to people-vs-people. Many fans complained that *Titan* turned stodgily slow when human conflicts took over. Even in its weakest episodes, *Kabaneri* moves fast, but its latter half is humourlessly dumb.

Kabaneri could be made into a Hollywood movie far more easily than *Titan*, keeping just the best bits... If, that is, *Kabaneri* wasn't set in Japan and made a big deal of it, and if racebending wasn't a thing.

A superb high-octane first half let down by an only passable second half. Hopefully the upcoming movie sequel will recapture *Kabaneri*'s B-movie glory. ●

★★★★☆

SEQUEL

While *Kabaneri* has an ending of sorts, it's the kind that leaves questions unanswered and journeys unfinished. The long-awaited sequel should appear next year, at least in Japan; it will be a film, subtitled *The Battle of Unato*.



FREE STUFF

When Margaret was first released in 1963, publisher Shueisha was determined to stamp on the competition from Kodansha's newly launched *Shojo Friend* competitor. 560,000 free copies were strewn around Japan, ensuring that every girl in the country got to read the first chapter of the magazine's newly launched storylines.

MANGA SNAPSHOT

BESSATSU MARGARET

Jonathan Clements on the blue-chip blue-inked manga mag

ISSUE #638 // DEBUT YEAR: 1964 // PAGE COUNT: C.650 // PUBLISHER: SHUEISHA // PRICE: 490 YEN (£3.30) // CYCLE: MONTHLY

THE ORIGINAL *MARGARET* magazine has a long history, first published in 1963 as a replacement for the defunct *Shojo Book*, a magazine that had itself been running since 1951. You don't get much more old-school than that, but actually keeping a magazine fresh for that long is a tall order. *Margaret* itself shows every sign of slowly slipping into oblivion, going from weekly to fortnightly in 1988, and with sales that have fallen 70% in the last decade.

Then again, as this column has observed before, paper magazine sales as a metric for success can be misleading, particularly since the exponential increase in digital editions after 2011. *Margaret* celebrated its half century in 2013 with a sold-out anniversary issue, which was also given away free on the internet to anyone who missed out on the paper edition. And there is a digital edition of *Margaret*, the market penetration of which is less visible than audited paper sales.

Where does this leave *Bessatsu Margaret* (1), the monthly spin-off that has been running for 54 years? Since there's no sign of it being cancelled, we can assume that readership and advertising still brings in a healthy return either through print or online, and that many of the initiation costs are amortised through later print volumes. All it has to do, then, is publish manga that will attract a loyal readership in the tens of thousands. No pressure.

Io Sakisaka's *Omoi, Omoware, Furi Furare* (2) seems to be effortlessly hitting the required sales figures. Regardless of how many people are buying the magazine, this manga's compilation volumes are still topping 150,000 in bookshops, as girls queue up to find out who's where in a complex love polygon. Sakisaka's storyline conflates several well-worn tropes – new neighbours who hit it off, unrequited love for your best friend's stepbrother, forbidden love for the girl who turns out to be your stepsister – it's like *The Brady Bunch* with love-hearts and long sighs. But this is a romance that turns on the very different attitudes towards love of its leading ladies – Yuna is a hopeless romantic, Akari is a relentless realist, and both of them receive a fair hearing in terms of the highs and lows of both positions.

Both the girls, however, have a sense of impending doom, as they are out with their respective love interests on a snowy day (this is the February issue, and hence printed in December), each trying to cling to the moment, afraid that by this time next year

they will all have gone their separate ways. Both girls, the realist and the romantic, are trying to enjoy what they have, rather than speculate about what they might be about to lose.

FAKERY AND FLUSTERING

Someone else with unrealistic expectations might arguably be Suzu Arisugawa, the pure-hearted protagonist of Akira Ozaki's *Miss Arisugawa in Wonderland* (3). Suzu has been raised by her traditionalist grandfather, with six o'clock curfews and old-fashioned home pursuits, to such an extent that she is practically an Edwardian fish out of water in modern Japan. It's difficult to believe that she really can get the train to school each day and not be exposed to a million marketing messages and advertising hoardings, but that's the conceit required for her to fall for the impossibly handsome pretty-boy Nomiya, a privileged and androgynous posh kid who himself has somewhat old-fashioned interests, and who genuinely wants to read Suzu's grandfather's *rakugo* books of old-school storytelling (see sidebar).

So there's a lot of flustered exchanges to be found, as there are in another manga in this issue, *Ideal Boyfriend* (4). Yusa has fallen for a boy in her class, but in order to save the feelings of her friend Nana, she has feigned disinterest and instead pretends to be going out with someone else, the first in a series of escalating deceptions that lead her to constantly fake having the titular ideal boyfriend in this manga series by Umi Ayase. But that means that Nana is getting closer to the boy Yusa really likes, and she is obliged to play gooseberry on dates when she would rather be the primary object of his affections.

Minami Mizuno's *Rainbow Days* (5) seems almost nonchalantly confident of its readership, focussing on a quartet of boys without the usual short-hand characterisation provided by a weird hobby. So no, they're not in the harmonica club, or the xylophone orchestra, and they don't collect beetles or snow globes, they are just four teenage boys, one of whom thinks he has fallen in love with a girl, while the rest meddle in his relationship fortunes.

One suspects that Mizuno's manga has enjoyed its 15-volume run because of how adult it is – in abstaining from the usual school pursuits, the characters have been allowed to age to the extent that this ends up looking a lot like the 20-something romances in magazines for adult women. However, that might just be because I'm coming in at the end, when everybody's grown >>>



THE ONE-MAN SIT-COM

Rakugo is a story-telling tradition in which a seated narrator will talk through the set-up and pay-offs of a usually comedic story, shifting between at least two characters solely by alterations in his voice. Supposedly, it has its origins in crowd-pleasing medieval Buddhist sermons. Largely wiped out by the advent of cinema and other distractions, it enjoys something of a vestigial existence on Japanese radio.

"SINCE THERE'S NO SIGN OF IT BEING CANCELLED, WE CAN ASSUME THAT READERSHIP AND ADVERTISING STILL BRINGS IN A HEALTHY RETURN EITHER THROUGH PRINT OR ONLINE, AND THAT MANY OF THE INITIATION COSTS ARE AMORTISED THROUGH LATER PRINT VOLUMES. ALL IT HAS TO DO, THEN, IS PUBLISH MANGA THAT WILL ATTRACT A LOYAL READERSHIP IN THE TENS OF THOUSANDS. NO PRESSURE."

>>> Tetsuro Amino anime has been released, and the manga is only running now as a series of catch-ups and spin-offs. In this chapter, self-described otaku Tsuyoshi is on vacation in Tokyo with his cosplay-loving girlfriend Yukiko, and Mizuno lets the artwork do the talking for much of the story, with the characters' body language repeatedly asserting that Tsuyoshi would rather be somewhere else, and Yukiko is constantly over-compensating with performative enthusiasm.

Momoko Koda's manga have previously attracted attention (even in the English language *Japan Times*) for the reality gap they present between Japanese and English-speaking expectations. Most notoriously, her *Sensei Kunshu* presented a sympathetic and romanticised view of a schoolgirl determined to seduce her teacher. Considered in such a light *Atashi No!* (Mine!, 6) is rather tame by comparison, featuring two lifelong acquaintances whose friendship is put under pressure by competition over a boy.



Teenagers Akoko and Mitsuki are discombobulated by the arrival of Naomi, a boy who really should be in the year above them, but who has been kept back a year because of all the important stuff he failed to learn on a year abroad. So he has a bad-boy cachet, an older-man sophistication, and he knows about foreign stuff – no wonder they are so excited about him.

Koda's manga, like all the other stories in this issue, accords her readers the deep respect of taking such issues as seriously as they do. The dating pool in the average high school is ridiculously shallow – whatever his alleged talking points, Naomi is hardly anything but a big fish in a very small pond, and the girls will surely work that out when they go to college, or get a job, or frankly just look out their window. But *they* don't know that, and possibly neither do the readership, and Koda dutifully envisages the limited horizons of their school as the confines of the Entire World.

Kaori Hoshiya's *In the Middle of the Edge of Space* (7) suffers



from the same Japanese coinage that gave us *On the Horizon in the Middle of Nowhere* – in Japanese it is possible to be “on the middle of the edge” of something, although in English translation it sounds redundant. For anyone hoping for some science fictional relief amid all this relentless high-school romance, it’s a disappointment. Despite planet-themed digressions and symbolism, it turns out to be yet another tale that flirts with independence and solitude, as teenager Mirai is (she believes) ousted from her mother’s affections by the arrival of her stepfather, and forced to finish off her school years living alone within the catchment area. Fortunately, she is distracted by the attentions of four boys in her class who are described as having idol-level good looks, all of whom are enrolled in the school’s astronomy club.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

All of which might be a reasonable glimpse inside the mind of a 17-year-old girl, but it gets wearing after the sixth or seventh iteration of the same storyline. Thank God, then, for *The World of Machida-kun* (8) by Yuki Ando, which revisits gentle high-school romance, but from the point of view of one of those mysterious boys we keep hearing about. The titular Machida is a quiet, specky loner who is so kind-hearted that he often seems to become a shoulder to cry on for his classmates in their own little dramas. He, however, is slowly coming to realise that he is carrying a torch for his classmate Miss Inohara, but having never been in love before, it takes him a long while to work out why he wants to be near her all the time. In turning the tables of clichéd romance for girls, Ando doesn’t just cunningly reach out to an entire untapped market of male readers, but offers *Margaret*’s target readership a boy’s-eye view of the events we’re seeing repeated in every other comic in this magazine.

The World of Machida-kun would be dull as dishwater in a boys’ magazine, but comes across here as strikingly original, although I can’t help observing that while Machida is certainly a recognisable type of boy, he is also something of a wish-fulfilment character for the average reader of *Margaret* who finds herself surrounded by actual teenage boys, replete with fart-gags, boob obsessions and constant mansplainy disdain. He’s an idealised romantic hero, thoughtful and considerate, and hence a world away from most of the idiots that populate other anime and manga.

Unsurprisingly, there are hints in this chapter that one of his friends at school already thinks he’s gay – this is what we’re reduced to now: assuming that if someone holds doors open for people, doesn’t habitually grope anyone, and is ready to talk about his feelings, then he must logically be homosexual. More than anything, *Bessatsu Margaret* seems to offer its readers a safe space away from toxic masculinity, and that includes the formats, storylines and characters often found elsewhere in the media. Bearing in mind the powerful trends in today’s media for #MeToo and equal representation, could it find itself oddly ahead of the times?

Bessatsu Margaret is a fascinating publication for these reasons and more. Editorially, is it really reflecting the concerns and feelings of the average 16-year-old girl in Japan, or is it desperately trying to paddle against the current, appealing to a dwindling niche of old-fashioned readers while the majority of the demographic in Japan is really obsessed with boys’ love manga, phone apps, and reality telly? If it really has lost 70% of its readership in the last decade, its current circulation may well be a reflection of a tough editorial policy that has targeted a faithful blue-chip niche, rather than trying to be all things to all girls. ●

THE LIMITS OF SHOJO

We usually translate the Japanese term *shojo* as “girl”, and assume that a shojo manga title like *Margaret* is aimed at under-15s. But in Japan, the legal definition of *shojo* includes anyone under the age of majority, which means any female under 20. A term like *shojo*, which usually means children, hence also encompasses much of what in other countries would be called the Young Adult market.

ANIME EXPOSÉ

DOUBLE DECKER! DOUG AND KIRILL

No Tigers or Bunnies



LAST MONTH, WE mentioned a common criticism of TV anime, that it's full of formulae and repetitions. Yet TV anime can also take amazingly reckless risks, especially when sequelling successful properties. Think of recent anime. *Tokyo Ghoul*: retook the first *Ghoul*'s war – between ghouls and humans – and switched the main character to the other side. *Steins;Gate 0* asked “What if the first series had had a far darker ending?” Even if you disliked these revivals, you have to admire their gall in *not* just giving fans more of the same.

Fans may find it harder to praise the handling of *Double Decker! Doug and Kirill*, a *fake* sequel. Yes, fake. It was publicised in Japan as a successor to *Tiger & Bunny*, the exuberant superhero show from 2011. *Double Decker!* was first announced on the official Japanese *Tiger & Bunny* Twitter account, leading fans to assume it was, indeed, a *Tiger & Bunny* sequel.

And it's *not*. Assuming there aren't big crossover twists in the last episodes, *Double Decker!* isn't set in the same world as *Tiger & Bunny*; it doesn't share any characters; and it's not a superhero show – though it has a supervillain or two, and a team fighting them, led by the title male duo.

The defence *might* argue that Sunrise never said *Double Decker!* was a *Tiger & Bunny* sequel, though it bafflingly referred to the series as “one part” of a “new *Tiger & Bunny* animation project”, which sounds exactly like, er, a sequel. Another unconvincing defence is to say that *Double Decker!* was conceived to appeal to *Tiger & Bunny*'s fanbase. It does indeed have an extremely similar look

to *Tiger & Bunny*, especially with its hugely attractive character designs, from drawings by *Tiger & Bunny*'s famed designer Masakazu Katsura, whose manga include *I's* and *Video Girl Ai*.

Certainly the *Double Decker!* characters could step into a frame of *Tiger & Bunny* without the slightest incongruity. But it would be silly to claim that somehow makes it a *Tiger & Bunny* series. It doesn't!

INESCAPABLY MADIOCRE

What *Double Decker!* is is a cop-buddy show. Fake sequel it may be, but let's give it its due – it feels like it's honestly trying to be interestingly different, despite many familiar elements. Like *Tiger & Bunny*, it's set in an imaginary city, called Risvalletta, and in what seems to be an alternate world with twin suns, though there are hints that it might turn out to be something else. Police fight crime gangs who push “Anthem,” a highly dangerous drug that allows users to reshape their bodies into monstrous forms – far from a new idea, going back to *Batman*'s Clayface.

The show's “different” idea is in the particulars of its buddy pairing. As in *Tiger & Bunny*, one of the title characters – Doug – is a cool professional with well-concealed anger issues, though he's the senior partner (in *T&B*, it was the youthful bishonen Bunny). His junior Kirill is... well, an idiot, and an irritating idiot, though with flashes of perceptiveness and common sense that



"FAKE SEQUEL IT MAY BE, BUT LET'S GIVE IT ITS DUE – IT FEELS LIKE IT'S HONESTLY TRYING TO BE INTERESTINGLY DIFFERENT, DESPITE MANY FAMILIAR ELEMENTS."



are meant to explain why on earth Doug partners with him.

We'd go along with this if the partnership was sufficiently appealing or intriguing, or if one of the characters stole the show so winningly that we'd happily keep watching just for him. That was what happened in *Tiger & Bunny*, where the middle-aged uncool Tiger blossomed into one of anime's most loveable heroes.

Sadly, nothing like that happens here. There's nothing embarrassingly terrible about Doug and Kirill – well, Kirill's a terrible cop, but that's intentional – and there's nothing offensively bad about *Double Decker!* But for all its reliably handsome designs and backgrounds, the show feels inescapably mediocre.

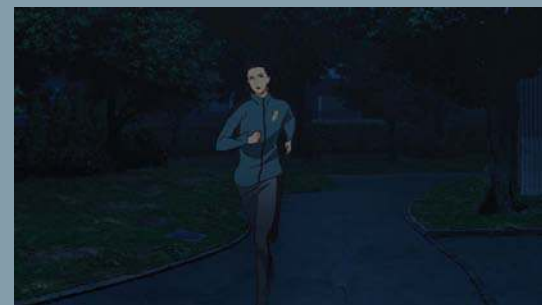
There are many good touches and points of interest, from Kirill's funny pursuit of a cat in the first episode, to another early episode which steers near the real world; it has trade union workers fighting industrial bosses before the story deflates

into comic-book contrivance. A later episode is smarter, dealing with a past acquaintance of Doug who's been murdered. This dead character turns out to be a walking crime-film cliché, but it's a *surprising* crime-film cliché, and the surprise means we don't stop caring.

Elsewhere, there's a lovely glimpsed sequence, dropped in casually, where two women in the police team enjoy a "host" bar full of youthful men. This reverses every scene in a hundred crime films where worldly male detectives somehow end up conducting their investigations in a strip club.

But the diverting situations and promising set-ups never compensate for a show that feels shapeless and aimless, even when you see the arc plots being obviously set up. Nor do they make up for the lack of any character who is even half as good as Tiger. Memo to Sunrise: the next time you tease fans with a *Tiger & Bunny* sequel, that's exactly what we expect! ●

NOW STREAMING...



RUN WITH THE WIND

For a studio once identified with sci-fi anime icons, Production I.G has become involved heavily with male sports dramas in the last decade: *Kuroko's Basketball*, *Haikyuu!!* and arguably even the male-slanted *Welcome to the Ballroom*. *Run with the Wind*, as you may guess, is about distance running, and has won fan praise for its supple animation and its engaging ensemble of male characters. This includes a petty teen criminal who's "scouted" running away from the convenience store he's just shoplifted.



GOBLIN SLAYER

This fantasy-world series is already infamous for a shocker of a first episode that pushes TV – even late-night TV – anime standards very far. The goblins in this show aren't just violent; they also relish sexual violence against women. Some of the content may give older readers flashbacks to exploitation anime of the '80s. After part one, the show settles into more conventional fantasy fare about the titular fearsome warrior, though with the threat that things could go nasty again at any time.



JOJO'S BIZARRE ADVENTURE – GOLDEN WIND

The long-awaited adaptation of *JoJo's* fifth manga arc, following *Diamond is Unbreakable*. It's set in more-or-less present-day Italy: *Diamond's* hero Koichi returns, but the new main character is Giorno Giovanna, an intrepid criminal with his own powers and a shocking link to one of the *JoJo* saga's deadliest villains. As anime, this is season four of the epic TV *JoJo* adaptation by David Production, which started in 2012. The first season is available from Manga Entertainment.

ANIME EXPOSÉ

ZOMBIE LAND SAGA

Concert of the Dead



WHEN IT COMES to cute zombie anime, the standard to beat is *School-Live!*, the preposterously heart-wrenching story of schoolgirls struggling to survive a zombie apocalypse. A live-action film version will open in Japan next year, with all the girls played by idol singers.

Which leads us to this season's *Zombie Land Saga*, where the zombies are idol singers. Seven dead girls are inexplicably restored to zombie "life," seemingly resurrected by a manically shouty male manager who wants to assemble a new idol band. This manager is so manic and unhinged that any horror-film mad scientist would ask him gently if he wanted a lie-down. He's hittably annoying at first, but he's so unchanging over successive episodes that you're eventually forced to find him funny.

Before we fill out more story details, we should clarify this anime bears no resemblance to the similarly-named *Zombieland*, the 2009 zom-comedy film with Woody Harrelson and Jesse Eisenberg (due to be sequelled next year). Actually, *Zombie Land Saga* is one of very few zombie titles today which *doesn't* involve the world being overrun by crowds of walking dead, which has been the standard zombie template for the 50 years since 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*.

Night's director George Romero (who passed on last year) gets a lovely nod in *Zombie Land Saga* – here, "Romero" is the name of the show's mascot zombie dog. But the anime harks back to zombie films *before* Romero. In them, zombies were often created as slaves by villainous humans, as in the early *White Zombie* (1932) with Bela Lugosi; the British Hammer film *Plague of the Zombies* (1966) where zombies toil in Cornish tin mines; and even a fondly remembered "Worst

Ever" film, *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), homaged in Tim Burton's *Ed Wood*, where the zombies are made by evil aliens. You can decide whether creating zombie as idol singers is any less wacky...

A STAR IS BORN (BUT ONLY AFTER GETTING HERSELF HORRIBLY KILLED)

So far, the show's biggest shock is in the opening two minutes. Our heroine, klutzy schoolgirl Sakura, rushes out of her house at the start of a new school year, anticipating wonderful experiences, without any worries or cares... and then she gets brutally smashed by a lorry coming along the road. Forget anime comedy series. These opening minutes could have made a horribly effective road safety advert to traumatise kids, and perhaps save a few of their lives.

Sakura remains our viewpoint character as she awakes in a sinister old house to find herself being chased by moaning, groaning zombie girls. (They're the old-school type who *don't* run, though we'll be terribly disappointed if there isn't an anime in 2020 about a zombie sprinting team entering the Tokyo Olympics.) Sakura escapes, running out into a stormy night and begging for help from a policeman... who screams and shoots her, just as she sees in a street-mirror that she's a zombie herself. We suspect the writer may have read a classic Lovecraft story *The Outsider*.

Following the shooting, Sakura wakes in the house again, where she's greeted by the manic svengali figure Kotaro, who insists she's destined to be a zombie idol. The first episode stays outstandingly weird. Sakura is the only girl in



One Cut of the Dead

Zombies have been big in Japan this year, where the very low-budget *One Cut of the Dead*, directed by Shinichiro Ueda, became a huge sleeper hit and won rave reviews worldwide. It starts like a zillion other zombie films (though the first segment is filmed in one continuous camera take, hence its name). Then it does something completely different and very, very funny. Cinema screenings around the country are scheduled from 4 January, and there'll be a home release 28 January from Third Window.

Zombie invasion

There are some other anime about zombies, or creatures *extremely* like zombies like *Kabaneri*. We won't count *High School of the Dead*, which is more about fanservice than the walking dead. However, arguably the best zombie anime episodes, and certainly the wittiest, are the ones that gatecrash non-zombie shows. *Space Dandy's* first season had a classic example, but there's also a great zombie episode in *Lupin the Third Part 4* (the first OVA episode), and another in the idol anime series *Super Sonico*.

1. Kotaro's typical management style. 2. Saki, the delinquent of the group. 3. Idols have to be prepared for any kind of costume.

this zombie harem who's regained her human personality, while the other girls still grunt 'n' groan. The punchline, when the girls go on stage together (Kotaro does wonders with death-hiding make-up) for their first public performance, is grotesquely funny and mildly disturbing. We won't spoil it.

By the next episode, though, five more of the girls have regained their personalities – though there's still one girl who's an out-and-out groaning zombie, and Kotaro won't consider throwing her out. The other girls are a motley blend of idols and celebrities from different decades, plus a century-old lady courtesan and a biker delinquent because... Look, who needs a reason? In the episodes we've seen, the only rationale for the situation is "Because it's silly". Don't worry, it's almost inevitable there'll be a backstory eventually, which will probably be just as silly but presented more seriously.

So far the show has given us some good laughs – there's a great gag involving Japanese-style rap singing, sweeter than anything in the *Tokyo Tribe* film – and a moderate level of charm. The girls are being built up conventionally but competently, with their issues and backstories slowly revealed. There's a particularly interesting subplot about the differences between "old-school", highly professional idols from decades ago and their cutely amateur successors.

However, the anime's fantasy premise seems to have far less potential than this season's *That Time I Got Reincarnated As A Slime*. Halfway through, *Zombie Land Saga* feels increasingly like any other idol series, though its opening episode was so strong as comedy-horror. Time for another lorry to crash into the show and shake it up again. ●



SEOUL STATION

You may have seen one of the most spectacular recent Asian zombie films, the South Korean *Train to Busan*, directed by Yeon Sang-Ho. But you may not know Yeon is also an animation director, and he made a "companion" feature-length animation called *Seoul Station*, depicting the same zombie outbreak. It doesn't share any characters with *Busan*, but it extends Yeon's social commentary through the undead hordes. It's on Blu-ray and DVD from StudioCanal, or streaming on YouTube or Amazon.

NEO



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[ANIME REVIEW]

MY HERO ACADEMIA: TWO HEROES

Saving The Day By The Numbers

OUT NOW // MANGA ENTERTAINMENT, FUNIMATION FILMS // 15 // ACTION // IN CINEMAS // 97 MINS

PLOT Held on a floating, fortified island, the I-Expo is the world's largest event dedicated to heroes and their Quirks. When criminals seize control of the island's security system and take the visitors hostage, it's up to Deku, All Might and the students from U.A. High School to save the day.

Given the enormous success of *My Hero Academia* in manga form – 16 million units and counting – it was inevitable that the anime version would make the jump from TV show to a feature film. *Two Heroes* retains series director Kenji Nagasaki, but it feels like Nagasaki and scriptwriter Yousuke Kuroda don't quite know how to get the best out of the concept for a self-contained, 90-minute adventure.

There are some things that *Two Heroes* does well. Deku makes a new friend in the form of Melissa who is Quirkless, just as Deku himself used to be. She's a strong enough character that hopefully this won't be her only appearance in the franchise. The daughter of a scientist, Melissa is smart, resourceful and brave. She's an active participant in the rescue mission and never reduced to a damsel in distress. Unfortunately, she's the only new character in the film that

the designers seem to have spent any time and energy on at all. The rest of the unfamiliar faces are entirely forgettable and drawn quite without flair. Melissa's genius dad, David Shield, is Generic Background Man, and the lead villain of the tale is similarly unremarkable. See if you can actually remember his name when the credits roll. He's only there so that Deku and All Might have someone to punch in the grand finale.

The screenplay never feels like there's anything personal at stake for Deku himself, and the English dialogue sorely lacks wit. Kacchan is particularly tiresome, constantly yelling at everyone to shut up, and sharp superhero banter is noticeable by its absence. *Deadpool* this is not.

There are a few twists to liven up the straightforward, linear plot, but overall the script feels underweight, content to tick off action scenes right on schedule. There's also a prologue to remind viewers of the premise behind the Quirks and the bond between Deku and All Might. That's a slightly odd choice – are newcomers to *My Hero Academia* likely to start with *Two Heroes*? The animation is strongest in the climactic showdown, full of explosions, energy and movement, while some earlier scenes look more like TV anime than a feature film.

Two Heroes feels like a missed opportunity. While Melissa is likeable and engaging and action scenes are solid, the lame villain and dull character designs make it seem like a throwaway movie, rather than an essential addition to the franchise. ●

☆☆☆☆

TRIVIA

My Hero Academia: Two Heroes opened at #5 at the Japanese box office this past August. At the time of writing, it was ranked #46 for the year overall.

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PS4 SEGA

Detective Dee and the Four Heavenly Kings



MOVIES FOR 2019!

The New Year brings with it the promise of a fresh start and the challenge of returning unwanted Xmas gifts without a receipt. But the one gift that keeps on giving is NEO's guide to the hottest cinema heading to screens large and small in 2019. From action to art house, mockumentaries to Mifune, let NEO's trusty scribe David West whet your appetite for the thrills that lie ahead.





ALITA: BATTLE ANGEL

Lost Memories And Sci-Fi Action

OUT: 6 FEBRUARY // **DISTRIBUTOR:** 20TH CENTURY FOX

Yukito Kishiro's action-packed sci-fi manga heads for the big screen with Robert Rodriguez directing and James Cameron producing and co-writing the screenplay. An amnesiac cyborg, named Alita (Rosa Salazar), is found and restored by Dr. Ido (Christoph Waltz) in a slum built around the scrapheap of a mysterious city that hangs overhead. While Alita can't recall her origins, she somehow knows a powerful, ancient form of martial arts that makes her a living weapon – and a target. Kishiro's tale is a sprawling epic that deals with issues of karma and identity; can the big themes survive the transition to Hollywood blockbuster?



ICEMAN: THE TIME TRAVELLER

OUT: 21 JANUARY // **DISTRIBUTOR:** CINE ASIA

Donnie Yen returns to the time-flung warrior he played in 2014's *Iceman* for this sequel directed by Raymond Yip. The plot sees corrupt copper Yuan-Long (Simon Yam) travel back in time to the Ming Dynasty with a view to seizing power, so good guy Ho Ying (Yen) pursues him back to the past. The film flopped at the Chinese box office, leading to a war of words between Yen and the producers, with the latter accusing Yen of being very unprofessional and uncooperative during filming, including changing his dialogue on a whim.



TRIPLE THREAT

The Martial Arts Dream Team

OUT: TBC // **DISTRIBUTOR:** WELL GO USA

British-born director and former stuntman Jesse V. Johnson assembles an action dream team for *Triple Threat*, bringing together Tiger Chen from *Man Of Tai Chi*, Iko Uwais from *The Raid*, and *Ong-Bak* star Tony Jaa in this thriller about three mercenaries fighting to protect a woman from a squad of highly-paid assassins. The supporting cast includes martial arts stars Scott Adkins and Michael Jai White, former UFC middleweight champion Michael Bisping, and Jeeja Yanin from *Chocolate*. The excellent Tim Man is action choreographer on the film and frankly, if *Triple Threat* doesn't deliver the best fight scenes of the year, we're going to sulk. Look out for an exclusive interview with Jesse V. Johnson in NEO next year!

DETECTIVE DEE AND THE FOUR HEAVENLY KINGS

The Super Sleuth Returns

OUT: APRIL // **DISTRIBUTOR:** CINE ASIA

If you like big budget, special effects extravaganzas, then Tsui Hark has you covered with the third instalment of his series about the Tang Dynasty super sleuth. After Andy Lau starred in 2010's *Detective Dee And The Phantom Flame*, Mark Chao took over in *Young Detective Dee: Rise Of The Sea Dragon*. Now in *Detective Dee And The Four Heavenly Kings*, Dee is up against the scheming Empress Wu (Carina Lau) who recruits a squad of mystics to aid her bid to usurp the throne from the Emperor. The film will be released individually and in a *Detective Dee* boxset.





BATTLE CREEK BRAWL

Jackie Takes On The USA

OUT: 28 JANUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: 88 FILMS

Originally released in 1980, *Battle Creek Brawl* was Jackie Chan's first attempt to break the American market. The film paired him with *Enter The Dragon* director Robert Clouse for a story about a young martial artist, Jerry (Chan), from Chicago forced to fight in a no-holds-barred tournament organised by the mob. It's a much better film than it is often given credit for, with strong comedic chemistry between Chan and Mako, who plays Jerry's irascible uncle and trainer Herbert. Despite the onset disagreements between star and director, the action captures Chan in his acrobatic prime.

SNAKE AND CRANE ARTS OF SHAOLIN

Kung Fu From The Vaults

OUT: 11 FEBRUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: 88 FILMS

Snake And Crane Arts Of Shaolin was one of the films that Jackie Chan made while under contract to Lo Wei's production company, although it didn't see a release until Chan became a star, thanks to his breakthrough performance in *Snake In The Eagle's Shadow*. Chan plays Hsu Yin-Fung, who possesses the manual for The Eight Steps Of The Snake And Crane, a powerful kung fu form developed by eight masters who have since disappeared. Lots of unscrupulous folks want to steal the coveted manual, necessitating that Hsu beat them up to keep it safe.



WHEELS ON MEALS

Best Fight Scene Ever?

OUT: EARLY 2019 // DISTRIBUTOR: EUREKA

Hailing from 1984, *Wheels On Meals* was one of the pivotal films that helped reimagine Hong Kong martial arts cinema, pulling it out of the past and into the present. Set in Spain, the somewhat slight plot sees best friends Thomas (Jackie Chan) and David (Yuen Biao) team up with private detective Moby (Sammo Hung) to protect a wealthy heiress, Sylvia (Lola Forner). Directed by Hung, the script switches between comedy skits (some more effective than others), and jaw-dropping fight scenes. The undisputed highlight is the showdown between Chan and the villain played by American kickboxing legend Benny Urquidez, which is possibly the greatest fight scene of all time.



THREE FILMS BY SAMMO HUNG

Heavyweight Action From Hung

OUT: SPRING 2019 // DISTRIBUTOR: EUREKA

As an actor, stuntman, action choreographer, and director, Sammo Hung has produced one of the most remarkable legacies in Hong Kong cinema, celebrated here by Eureka. *The Iron-Fisted Monk* was Hung's 1977 directorial debut, about Shaolin-trained kung fu fighters taking on the Manchus. In *The Magnificent Butcher*, directed by Yuen Wo-Ping, Hung plays Lam Sai-Wing, the senior student of Wong Fei-Hung, played by Kwan Tak-Hing. Finally, *Eastern Condors* is a Vietnam War movie with an all-star cast that includes Hung, Yuen Biao, Lam Ching-Ying and Yuen Wah. The climactic fight scene will leave you bruised and breathless.



HAND OF DEATH/LAST HURRAH FOR CHIVALRY

Two Early Outings From Woo

OUT: EARLY 2019 // DISTRIBUTOR: EUREKA

Two early martial arts outings from the great John Woo. *Head Of Death*, from 1976, brings together the talents of Woo and Sammo Hung, who serves as action choreographer, while Jackie Chan has a supporting role. In the lead, Dorian Tan plays Yung Fei, a Shaolin fighter out for revenge on Shih Shao-Feng (James Tien), who killed his master. Classic. 1979's *Last Hurrah For Chivalry* saw Woo tackle the swordplay genre, with a story about the bond between two warriors, Chang San (Wei Pai) and Tsing Yi (Damian Lau). Heavily influenced by Woo's mentor Chang Cheh – complete with Chang's trademark disembowelment motif – the film boasts great action direction by Fung Hak-On.



THE FATE OF LEE KHAN

Hail To The King

OUT: AUTUMN 2019 // DISTRIBUTOR: EUREKA

From 1973 comes this absolute classic from King Hu, in which a squad of Ming rebels plan to assassinate the powerful and cruel Mongol lord Lee Khan (Tian Feng) when he stops at the remote Spring Inn. There's a terrific cast including Angelo Mao, Han Ying-Chieh, Li Li-Hua and Roy Chiao.

Sammo Hung was martial arts director on the movie and unlike Hu's earlier works with their Peking Opera-style action, Hung's fight blends the acrobatics of Chinese Opera with the more grounded choreography of Bruce Lee. Hu's decision to fill the cast with women in martial arts roles was way ahead of its time and the final showdown with the evil Lee Khan is a thriller.

ZU WARRIORS

A Wuxia Wonder From Tsui

OUT: LATE 2019 // DISTRIBUTOR: EUREKA

Tsui Hark's best films have usually taken existing concepts and given them an update – *Once Upon A Time In China* was inspired by Hu Peng's film series from 1950s, and *The Blade* remade Chang Cheh's *One-Armed Swordsman*. In 1983's *Zu: Warriors From The Magic Mountain*, Tsui took the old swordplay movies of early Chinese cinema, full of flying heroes with magic powers, and gave them a spectacular makeover packed with special effects and wild ideas. Yuen Biao plays a lowly army scout who winds up on a quest to save the world from the evil Blood Demon. The cast includes Mang Hoi, Sammo Hung, Moon Lee, and Brigitte Lin, plus there's wonderful action choreography by Corey Yuen.





AN ELEPHANT SITTING STILL

The Decline Of Chinese Civilisation

OUT: FEBRUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: NEW WAVE FILMS

The debut film by novelist turned director Hu Bo concerns four characters struggling to survive in post-industrial China. Teenager Wei Bu (Peng Yuchang) is in trouble after pushing the school bully down the stairs; teenager Huang Ling (Wang Yuweng) is having an affair with a married teacher; grandfather Jin (Liu Congxi) finds his family no longer want to care for him; and small-time criminal Cheng (Zhang Yu) is shaken by the death of his best friend. Like Jia Zhangke's films, *An Elephant Sitting Still* casts a scathing eye over contemporary China and the human cost of economic transformation.



ASH IS THE PUREST WHITE

Crime And Punishment

OUT: SPRING 2019 // DISTRIBUTOR: NEW WAVE FILMS

Jia Zhangke sticks to his central theme – the changing character of China – in *Ash Is Purest White*. Qiao (Tao Zhao) is the girlfriend of Bin (Fan Liao), a gangster fighting a turf war against a rival mob. When she takes the blame for possession of an illegal handgun to save Bin, she emerges from her time in prison to find a country she no longer recognises. Worse, Bin has moved on with a new woman, so Qiao must forge her own future in this new dog-eat-dog world. New Wave Films' release will be coming our way in Q2 of 2019.



THE RECEPTIONIST

Living On The Edge

OUT: TBC // DISTRIBUTOR: MUNRO FILM SERVICES

Tina (Teresa Daley) is a college graduate from Taiwan desperate to secure a job in London, but the only work she can find is as the receptionist in an illegal brothel run by Lily (Sophie Gopsill). At first Tina looks down on the working girls, Sasa (Chen Shiang-Chyi), Mei (Amanda Fan) and Anna (Shuang Teng), but she slowly comes to sympathise with their desperate circumstances. Chen Shiang-Chyi was excellent in Hsiang Chienn's *Exit*, from 2014, and Taipei-based director Jenny Lu's debut feature is a portrait of people forced to scrape out a living on the dangerous margins of society, where their illicit profession makes them frighteningly vulnerable.

BURNING

Smouldering With Resentment

OUT: 1 FEBRUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: THUNDERBIRD RELEASING

Lee Chang-dong brings Haruki Murakami's short story *Barn Burning* to the screen, dissecting issues of class in South Korea. Jongsu (Yoo Ah-in) is smitten with Haemi (Jeon Jong-seo) after they meet in Seoul and she tells him they went to school together, although he doesn't recognise her. When she returns from a trip to Africa with a rich boyfriend, Ben (Steven Yeun), Jongsu is naturally jealous. But the more he gets to know Ben, the more worried he becomes that the man is not what he appears, particularly after the interloper casually says he enjoys a spot of recreational arson.



SHOPLIFTERS

Family Matters

OUT: MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: THUNDERBIRD RELEASING

Following its theatrical run this year, Hirokazu Kore'eda's *Shoplifters* heads for home entertainment in 2019. The movie won the Palme d'Or at Cannes and tells the story of Osamu (Franky Lily) and his family who scrape by on lives of petty crime. Returning home from a bout of shoplifting, Osamu and his son Shota (Kairi Jyo) find a little girl, Juri (Miyu Sasaki), who appears to have been abused. So, Osamu decides to take her in. Kore'eda has distinguished himself as Japan's finest contemporary filmmaker exploring what it means to be a family, and *Shoplifters* was a huge domestic hit.



TREMBLE ALL YOU WANT

Fantasy versus reality

OUT: APRIL // DISTRIBUTOR: THIRD WINDOW FILMS

Akiko Ohku's offbeat romantic comedy is based on a novel by Risa Wataya and addresses the pressure on Japanese women to settle down and get married. Yoshika (Mayu Matsuoka) works in an office and copes with her social anxiety by escaping into her own fantasies which include carrying a torch for her teenage crush Ichi (Takumi Kitamura), whom she hasn't seen for years. She decides to organise a school reunion so she can see him again, even as her co-worker Kirishima (Daichi Watanabe) awkwardly tries to ask her to be his girlfriend – although he's so nervous he ends up barfing, which isn't the best way to woo a lady.

ONE CUT OF THE DEAD

A Breakout Smash

OUT: 28 JANUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: THIRD WINDOW FILMS

Shinichiro Ueda's *One Cut Of The Dead* is one of the surprise success stories of Japanese cinema. Made for US\$27,000, it only opened on two screens, but has now taken US\$30 million in Japan alone and won a host of awards at international film festivals.

The story starts out with a film crew shooting a low budget zombie movie, only to be set upon by real zombies. Then it changes direction completely and becomes a comedy about the trials and tribulations of the indie movie world. Following a theatrical run from 4 January, Ueda's zombie-comedy comes to DVD four weeks later.



LEGEND OF THE STARDUST BROTHERS

Seeking Fame And Fortune

OUT: MAY // DISTRIBUTOR: THIRD WINDOW FILMS

Directed by Macoto Tezuka, the son of manga legend Osamu Tezuka, *Legend Of The Stardust Brothers* started out as a soundtrack that composer Haruo Chicada wrote for a film that didn't actually exist. When Tezuka heard the music, he decided to make a film to accompany Chicada's music. The resulting movie, originally from 1985, tells the story of Kan (Kan Takagi) and Shingo (Shingo Kubota), two aspiring pop stars ordered to pose as long-lost brothers reunited by music in a bid to make them more marketable. Expect singing, dancing, and '80s fashions in a cult film never previously distributed outside of Japan.



RINGU

A Creeping Classic Returns

OUT: 1 MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: ARROW FILMS

Arrow celebrates the 21st birthday of Hideo Nakata's seminal J-horror film *Ringu* by bringing it back to cinemas in March. The plot revolves around a lethal videotape – back when physical media was still the norm. Anyone who watches the tape dies seven days later, which is bad news for Reiko (Nanako Matsushima), a journalist who watches the tape while researching a spate of sudden deaths amongst teenage girls. With its inescapable creeping dread instead of jump scares, the film had a massive influence on the horror genre and the unsettling, ghostly figure of Sadako, with her long black hair, has become an international icon.



TOP KNOT DETECTIVE

The Cult Show That Never Was

OUT: MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: THIRD WINDOW FILMS

Aaron McCann and Dominic Pearce celebrate the excesses of Japanese television with this spoof documentary that takes a peak at the sordid chaos behind the scenes of the fictional TV series *Ronin Suirei Tentai* aka *Top Knot Detective*. The movie starts from the premise that the show has become a cult classic on VHS in Australia and the filmmakers try to uncover the fate of its fallen star Takashi Takamoto (Toshi Okuzaki), who played the titular hero, a samurai investigator dealing with everything from ninjas and cyborgs to an

endless parade of clumsy product placements from the show's backers, the Sutaffu corporation. The only things more outrageous than the series were the intrigues off-camera, where Takamoto maintained a personal rivalry with his co-star Haruto Kioke (Masa Yamaguchi), who was also the son of Sutaffu's chairman, even as he pursued a forbidden romance with leading actress Mia Matsumoto (Mayu Iwasaki). An affectionate but very well-informed dissection of Japanese pop culture, *Top Knot Detective* is due out this spring.



MIFUNE: THE LAST SAMURAI

The Man Behind The Legend

OUT: 25 FEBRUARY // DISTRIBUTOR: BFI

Steven Okazaki's documentary celebrates the life and work of one of cinema's greatest actors, Toshiro Mifune, the star of *Seven Samurai*, *Yojimbo*, and so many other classic films. Narrated by Keanu Reeves, the documentary includes contributions with such famous fans as Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg, as well as actors who worked with Mifune including Haruo Nakajima – the original man inside the monster suit as Godzilla – and Kyoko Kagawa. Raised in China, Mifune first came to Japan when he was 20 to fight in World War II. Following the end of the conflict, he hoped to become a cameraman and fell into acting quite by accident, but his charisma and almost volcanic intensity made him famous. He was no less compelling away from the cameras, with a fondness for fast cars, heavy drinking, and picking fights with gangsters.

SHINYA TSUKAMOTO'S KILLING

Kill Or Be Killed

OUT: JUNE // DISTRIBUTOR: THIRD WINDOW FILMS

Shinya Tsukamoto's career has seen the actor and director tackle everything from body horror to boxing and war films. With *Killing*, he turns his attention to the chanbara film for the first time for a story set in the twilight of the Edo period as the curtain was slowly coming down on the age of the samurai. Mokunoshin Tsuzuki (Sosuke Ikematsu) is a ronin reluctant to kill, preferring to help a village of farmers bring in the harvest, while giving swordsmanship lessons to a farmer's son called Ichisuke (Ryusei Maeda). Jirozaemon Sawamura (Shinya Tsukamoto) is a swordsman recruiting fighters to travel to Edo to defend the Shogun, but Mokunoshin's ambivalence about killing becomes an urgent problem when bandits target the village.





DIE TOMORROW

Meditations On Mortality

OUT: JUNE // DISTRIBUTOR: DAY FOR NIGHT

Thai director Nawapol Thamrongrattanarit's 2013 film *Mary Is Happy, Mary Is Happy* was inspired by the Twitter feed of an unknown girl. Now the filmmaker turns to the subject of mortality in *Die Tomorrow*, blending documentary-style interviews and fictional segments to explore the different ways that people deal with the prospect of their own demise. The film notes that one person dies every two seconds and keeps a running tally, but it's far less gloomy than that suggests, preferring to see how people pursue meaning in the here and now, rather than in the hereafter.



LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHT

OUT: SPRING/SUMMER // DISTRIBUTOR: NEW WAVE FILMS

When his father dies, Luo Hongwu (Huang Jue) returns to his hometown Kaili to try to find his old lover, the beautiful but elusive Wan Qiwen (Tang Wei).

That's the basic premise of the second feature from Chinese director Bi Gan, but *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is less of a film noir about a femme fatale and more of an attempt to capture the experience of dreaming onscreen. The centrepiece of the film is a 55-minute continuous shot as Luo is swept away in a dream.



OF LOVE AND LAW

Taking On The System

OUT: 1 MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: HAKAWATI

Japan has a well-deserved reputation as a society that places a high value on conformity, obedience, and the subjugation of the individual to the group. Hikaru Toda's documentary looks at some of the people flouting such conventions. Fumi and Kazu are an openly gay couple running a law firm in Japan where they attract clients who, like the lawyers themselves, find themselves pushed to the fringes of society. These include an artist arrested for obscenity, a teacher fired for refusing to sing the national anthem, and people struggling for legal recognition simply because they're not listed on family registries. Should be a fascinating watch.

NERVOUS TRANSLATION

Through The Eyes Of A Child

OUT: MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: DAY FOR NIGHT

Set in the Philippines in the late 1980s during the uncertain aftermath of the deposing of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Shireen Seno's film is built around Yael, an eight-year-old girl, and her attempts to make order out of the chaos of life. Her mother, Val (Angge Santos), is so exhausted when she comes home from work that Yael isn't allowed to talk to her for the first half-hour. Meanwhile, Yael's father is working abroad and her only connection to him comes from listening to the taped letters he sends to her mother on cassette. Seno's movie won awards at the Rotterdam and Shanghai film festivals, and will be out in the UK in March from Day for Night.



NEO NEW YEAR!

Going to Japan is one of NEO readers' top New Year resolutions. Here's our handy guide to some of the best things to enjoy when you visit Tokyo!



SOAK IN THE SIGHTS AT AKIHABARA

Tokyo's electric town is a must-visit for any NEO reader – a whole shopping area dedicated to otaku. Here you'll find scores of shops dedicated to anime, manga and doujinshi, or fan-made comics, as well as maid cafes and electronics stores. Yodobashi Camera is one of the top gadget shops and is definitely worth a look if you're out for a bargain, as is Mandarake, which is one of the largest anime and manga shops in the world. There's also AKIHABARA Gamers, a speciality store for anime, CDs, knick-knacks and all kinds of collectibles. For a more general shopping experience, you have to try Don Quijote! You'll also find Akihabara Dear Stage, a multi-storey music venue and club where you can watch live performances or visit the café where the wait staff are budding idols and voice actors. (Our resident idol, Mahiru, wrote about it in her debut column in NEO 167!)

Have a Japanese breakfast

Your hotel may offer you breakfast on your trip – but don't expect fried eggs, sausages and bacon! A basic Japanese breakfast will consist of onigiri with furikake sprinkled on top (a variety of different seasonings that pep up rice and include everything from dried seaweed to sesame seeds!) and miso soup. Try it at least once – it's delicious! There are always plenty of baked goods in your nearest conbini if you need something a bit more familiar.



PET HACHIKO

One of Shibuya's loveliest landmarks is located right outside Shibuya station. A bronze statue of Hachiko, the faithful hound who waited outside the station every day for his master, is a meeting point for many locals – and also a great place to get a photo. Once you've had your pic with Hachiko, don't forget to experience the Shibuya scramble! The iconic crossing is always crowded and has been featured in countless movies and anime, and has enormous TV screens and adverts on display atop the nearby buildings. A fantastic place to view the crossing is from the Starbucks in Tsutaya – but if you're going up there to watch, make sure you buy a drink! Both the crossing and the Starbucks are the busiest of their kind in the world, so be ready to brave the crowds.



GO TO THE GHIBLI MUSEUM

Getting a ticket to the Studio Ghibli Museum can be difficult and expensive, as you can't buy them on the door. In Japan, you can purchase them from LAWSON conbinis, but the rest of the world have to go through agents (the official guide even involves a flow chart to navigate the process). Luckily, it's absolutely worth it, because the museum has been designed to invoke a feeling of childlike wonder in even the most jaded visitor! Even the tickets, which are Ghibli film strips, have a glorious magical property to them. Inside the museum are a series of rooms to demonstrating how an animated film comes to life, plus a theatre showing exclusive short Ghibli movies, as well as a special exhibition space which changes regularly. There's even the Straw Hat café and a gift shop. Good bye money, hello plushie Cat Bus.



VISIT A SHRINE OR TEMPLE

The Buddhist Sensoji Temple is Tokyo's oldest temple, and is most famous for the Kaminarimon – Thunder Gate – which is a huge red and white gate with an enormous black and red lantern in the middle. Lining the street to approach it (called the Nakamise-dori) are over 80 shops selling everything from kimono to snacks. Street food vendors are also on hand to tempt you with thick, sugary matcha drinks, or soft, sweet and pillowy kibi dango, along with a variety of other incredible and unique treats from the Asakusa district. If you'd like to get your fortune, you can give a small donation to collect your written omikuji, or paper fortune. If they're good, you keep them, but bad ones can be tied to a rack to symbolise you leaving the bad luck behind.

The Shinto Meiji Shrine is located near Harajuku and is also well worth a visit. There are different ways to pay respect at the shrine, including rinsing your hands and mouth with water at the font, or offering some coins and bowing and clapping at the main building. You can even pick up an omamori, or lucky charm, from the juyosho, or amulet office.



Try an authentic version of your favourite Japanese food

There's nothing like trying an authentic version of your favourite dish in its home country! If you're a curry fiend, you'll find plenty of places to grab some curry rice, including the popular chain Curry House CoCo Ichibanya, which has menus in English online. There are scores of ramen joints – try to find one with a ticket machine for extra fun! If takoyaki's your thing, you might find a stall selling it – but remember, don't eat and walk!



CLIMB TOKYO TOWER

One of Tokyo's most enduring symbols is the brightly coloured orange and white Tokyo tower, inspired by the Eiffel tower in France and eccentrically painted orange and white to adhere to air safety laws. The Tower features two recently renovated observatories, the Main Deck at 150 metres, and the Top Deck at 249.6 metres. From there, you can look out over the city – and if you're lucky, you might even be able to spot Mount Fuji on a very clear day!

Tokyo Tower is one of Japan's most iconic landmarks, and has appeared in shows from *Sailor Moon* to *Digimon* and *Death Note*. It's often destroyed by Godzilla and his fellow monsters of the silver screen, but in real life, the most pressing issue of maintenance is repainting it, which takes place every five years and takes a year to complete, using 28,000 litres of paint!

Try to speak some Japanese

Even putting minimum effort into learning some basic words will pay off when you're in Japan. Learn to say please, thank you, excuse me and so on – but also, try learning some food-related words too! Complimenting a sushi chef will go a long way at a stand up bar!

JAPAN JOURNEYS

If you want to visit Japan, make sure you head to www.japanjourneys.co.uk! Benefit from their years of experience crafting package trips, and check out their guided tours for everything from manga to the Tokyo Game Show, bonsai, and gourmet food! Included in the price are flights, your hotel, a guide, and JJ even takes care of the tickets and transport so you can just enjoy the trip! NEO's been on two holidays with Japan Journeys and we highly recommend their Manga Tours: call 020 7766 5267 or email info@japanjourneys.co.uk.



[FILM REVIEW]

DANGAN RUNNER

Sabu's debut hits the ground running

OUT NOW // THIRD WINDOW FILMS // 15 // COMEDY // £17.99
(DUAL FORMAT) // 82 MINS

PLOT Wannabe bank robber Yasuda (Tomoru Taguchi) is caught trying to steal a mask from a store. The cashier, Aizawa (Diamond Yukai), chases him through the streets, colliding with Takeda (Shinichi Tsutsumi), a yakuza to whom he owes money, prompting the gangster to join the pursuit.

First released in Japan in 1996, *Dangan Runner* is the debut of writer and director Sabu, whose later works include adapting the wonderful *Bunny Drop* anime into a live action movie. The tone here leans towards dark comedy with a distinct streak of nihilism, not unlike Takeshi Kitano. The movie has a low budget

aesthetic, many scenes look they were shot with available light, but it's the energy of Sabu's direction and his cast that make the film work. It's worth bearing with the slightly slow start that establishes Yasuda's motivation for his planned robbery, because once the chase is on Sabu keeps the pacing brisk. He uses flashbacks to fill in the history of the convenience store worker and the yakuza. What unites the runners is that they're all failures – dumped by his girlfriend, Yasuda can't even pull off the smallest crime, Aizawa is a failed rock star, and Takeda is haunted by his inability to protect his boss.

It's not entirely clear if Sabu knows what point he's trying make in *Dangan Runner*, as the nihilistic ending doesn't really match up with the euphoria that eventually overtakes the three chasers, but it's a fun ride while it lasts. ●



KEY TALENT

Tomoru Taguchi is best known for his starring role in the film that launched the career of director Shinya Tsukamoto, the notoriously deranged *Tetsuo*, *The Iron Man* from 1989.



[ANIME REVIEW]

365 DAYS' TIME

ASSASSINATION CLASSROOM THE MOVIE

OUT NOW // MANGA ENTERTAINMENT // 15 // COMEDY, ACTION, SCI-FI
// £24.99 (BLU-RAY, DVD) // 92 MINS

PLOT A short retelling of the saga of Koro-sensei, the tentacled teacher training students to kill him. The film mainly focuses on the story's epic ending, with *lots* of tears.

It's a recap... and there's very little else to say. There's some minimal new material, so perfunctory that it's annoying, as students Nagisa and Karma return to their old schoolhouse and wander down memory lane, cuing 90 minutes of flashbacks from the TV series. The tiresome framing device, devoid of jokes or surprises, points up how the film has nothing to add to what was a charming, funny and enjoyable show.



WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

There might have been a point to seeing this film in the cinema, as more than half its running time consists of the fairly spectacular finale from the end of season two. Tentacled teacher Koro-sensei faces off against Akira-style satellites and old enemies, before the hankies come out for the finish. It's archetypal *Shonen Jump* action, but the film has little of *Classroom*'s lovability that made you care when these battles were ramped up in the series. As a home purchase, the film's pointless even for fans, and it's utterly meaningless to new viewers.

There's more *Classroom* out there – believe it or not, there's a two-part live-action film version, featuring a CG Koro-sensei, which was popular in Japan. We don't know if it's good or terrible, but it'd surely be far more interesting than this rehash.

A pointless recap of an excellent series. ●



EXTRAS

Japanese and English tracks. This edition also includes a commentary track with three of the English dub crew – ADR Director Apphia Yu and the actors Sonny Strait (Koro-sensei) and Austin Tindle (Karma).

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[ANIME REVIEW]

MOB PSYCHO 100

No-ego hero

OUT NOW // MANGA ENTERTAINMENT // 15 // COMEDY, ACTION //
£34.99 (BLU-RAY) // 275 MINS // 12 EPISODES

PLOT Schoolboy Shigeo (nicknamed Mob) is a sweet kid who doesn't deserve to be saddled with psychic powers. But here he is, facing ghosts, gangs and a rival he fears fighting far more than any of them...

The publicity for this series will play up its link to *One-Punch Man*. Both anime are based on manga by the same artist, known as ONE, though the anime were by different studios and indeed *feel* quite different. Just because you like one of them, you may not like the other, and we'd dare suggest *Mob Psycho 100* is better.

Both titles have heroes who are absurdly over-powered, but who aren't terribly happy about it. *Mob's* hero, though, doesn't wear a cape and leotard. No, *Mob's* a Japanese schoolboy with a pudding-bowl haircut, a soft voice, and a bland, faintly worried expression that Clark Kent would find effete. The show starts like *Ghostbusters*, with Mob working as the "assistant" to a spook hunter, Reigen, who's obviously a massive fake – obvious to everyone except the loyal Mob, who takes down giant-sized bellowing yokai for Reigen without ever losing his "sorry" face. Then Mob gets roped into gang wars, and inevitably he must face other psychics (kids and adults) who have all the ego-driven aggression he lacks.

The series is often very funny, and also sweet-natured. While *One Punch Man's* superhero comedy often felt as

heartless as *Monty Python*, *Mob* has charm and human reality. The conflicts revolve round male repressions, envies and insecurities. There are hilarious sight-gags about one boy character's king-sized hairdo, which *Mob* presents as the compensatory equivalent of the proverbial oversized car.

Mob also benefits from bouts of stellar visuals, with crowds of great character designs and much phenomenally animated action. If you loved the work of Masaaki Yuasa in anime like *Ping-Pong*, this isn't far off. There are mad battles bashing bodies up, down and sideways through space à la *Asterix*; bug-eyed character close-ups battling each other for frame room; and some eerily liquid dissolving images, created by an artist manipulating paint on glass.

Unfortunately, *Mob's* chaos is only half-organised. Some great support characters are set up in the first half and forgotten later, including a hilarious team of muscle-obsessed body-builders and a couple of girls who don't develop beyond tokens.

Moreover, the last fight-after-fight scenes retrace the old *Shonen Jump*-meets-*X-Men* formula. As loads of characters run endlessly round the corridors of a hyper-generic secret base, there are cute cliché-busting jokes, but it gets disappointingly ordinary and protracted. Indeed, the climactic episodes are the only ones which get actually boring, though the ending delivers a good emotional payoff, with an impassioned motivational speech by a surprise character which actually means something.

An uneven show, but with plenty of hand-drawn dazzle and far more charm than the same author's *One Punch Man*. ●
★★★★☆

EXTRAS

Japanese and English tracks. Extras include "short" episodes with the characters shown in the style of 8-bit games. A second season of the show will start broadcast in January.

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[FILM REVIEW]

THE FORTRESS

They can hide but they can't run

OUT NOW // SIGNATURE ENTERTAINMENT // 15 // DRAMA // £4.49 (VOD RENT), £9.99 (VOD BUY) // 139 MINS

PLOT In 1636, the King of Joseon has sworn loyalty to the Ming Emperor of China, and when the Qing launch an invasion from Manchuria, King Injo (Park Hae-il), faces a stark choice – pledge his allegiance to the Qing's Khan and accept his demands, or go to war against the invaders.

With the Joseon royal court trapped inside Namhan Fortress, ministers Choi (Lee Byung-hun) and Kim (Kim Yoon-seok) argue over their opposing responses to the Qing's hostility. Choi insists a peace treaty must be agreed to avoid the wholesale slaughter of the Joseon people, while the belligerent Kim maintains that force is the only language the Qing respect.

Director Hwang Dong-hyuk brings a stately poise to this historically-inspired drama, focussing more on the intrigue and power struggles within the court than on battles and bloodshed. Lee Byung-hun plays against type, with a role that casts him as a philosopher and diplomat rather than as an action hero. The tussles between the two ministers take place as they kneel before their king, each passionately arguing their case even as they keep their eyes carefully lowered before his majesty. Instead, the physical heroics are left to the supporting players, notably Park Hee-soon as fortress commander Lee Shi-baek, who slices and dices

through the Qing soldiers, and Go Soo as Nal-soe, a brave blacksmith pressed into military service.

Subplots abound to bring the characters to life. Kim ends up taking in a little girl orphaned by the conflict, played by the impossibly adorable Jo Ah-in, guaranteed to poignantly pluck the heartstrings. The script, based on the novel by Kim Hoon, is undeniably sympathetic to the Joseon cause, but it's not above criticising the corruption and injustice of the country. The Qing's translator is a Joseon-born man who, when confronted about his allegiance to the invaders, angrily replies that under Joseon rule he wasn't even considered human because he was a peasant.

Similarly, the Joseon court and military are packed with self-serving careerists whose ambition is outstripped only by their incompetence, particularly the Prime Minister (Song Young-chang), a blowhard happy to sacrifice soldiers and commoners but unwilling to endure the least discomfort.

The overall mood is one of doom and resignation, expressing a very Korean fatalism that reflects how many times the country has been invaded and subjugated by its powerful neighbours. Action scenes, although infrequent, are impressive in scale and visceral in execution, providing a welcome contrast to the sometimes languidly paced court debates.

The Fortress can be gloomy, if not morose, but the performances are very good while the cinematography and sets are beautiful. It's that rarest of historical dramas, told from the point of view of the losing side, not the victors. ●



KEY TALENT

Kim Ji-yong's majestic cinematography in *The Fortress* has swept up awards, including prizes from the Asian Film Awards, the Korean Association Of Film Critics, and Camerimage's coveted Golden Frog.

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[ANIME REVIEW]

VAMPIRE PRINCESS MIYU COMPLETE COLLECTION

A retro slice of anime horror

21 JANUARY // MVM // CERT 12 // SUPERNATURAL // £39.99 (DVD) // 650 MINS // 26 EPISODES

PLOT Our world is infested by the Shinma – demon creatures that manipulate humans for their own gain. In her role as the Guardian, it's the mission of Miyu, a half-vampire schoolgirl, to hunt down all the stray Shinma causing trouble and return them back to “the darkness”.

Based on a long-running manga series and preceded by an (albeit unrelated) four-part OVA nine years prior, when the *Vampire Princess Miyu* television series was first released in 1997 it seemed to assume that viewers would be aware of just what *Vampire Princess Miyu* is. Other than the brief narration that accompanies the opening it throws the viewer in completely at the deep end, offering very little in the way of introduction and jumping straight into a “monster of the week” episodic format. It isn't until towards the very end of the show that it begins to provide sufficient back story and move into an excellent ongoing story arc, both of which it could have benefitted from at a far earlier point.

As a result of this, Miyu as a character never really gets to meet her full potential. There's a lot to like about her, and the fact the show forgoes the expected “stoic protagonist” route

and has her go to school, make friends and show emotion really means a lot when it so easily could have been omitted. But with both her backstory and the plot-centric episodes coming so late in the game, Miyu simply feels like a witness in her own show.

Fight sequences are rather underwhelming, mostly consisting of Miyu showing up at the scene and stopping the Shinma with one attack. Miyu isn't the only victim of this either, as the same can be said of both her faithful servant Larva and her icy rival Reiha.

But while the continuous part of the series may be flawed, on the other hand it really shines when it comes to crafting its single episode stories. Variety is *Vampire Princess Miyu*'s greatest strength, and it revels in creating disturbing stories that often aren't quite as predictable as they might seem. In true horror fashion it's often the endings that leave the biggest impact, with things rarely turning out well for the Shinma's victims – especially if they manage to survive the ordeal. Things get particularly interesting when you begin to question Miyu's methods as well, presenting lasting implications that only add to the overwhelming sense of horror and hopelessness.

Dark, atmospheric and more often than not relentlessly bleak, *Vampire Princess Miyu* has the makings of a great supernatural horror series. However, it's too complacent in its own formula, and had it just pushed its main story elements a little further could have been something truly special. ●

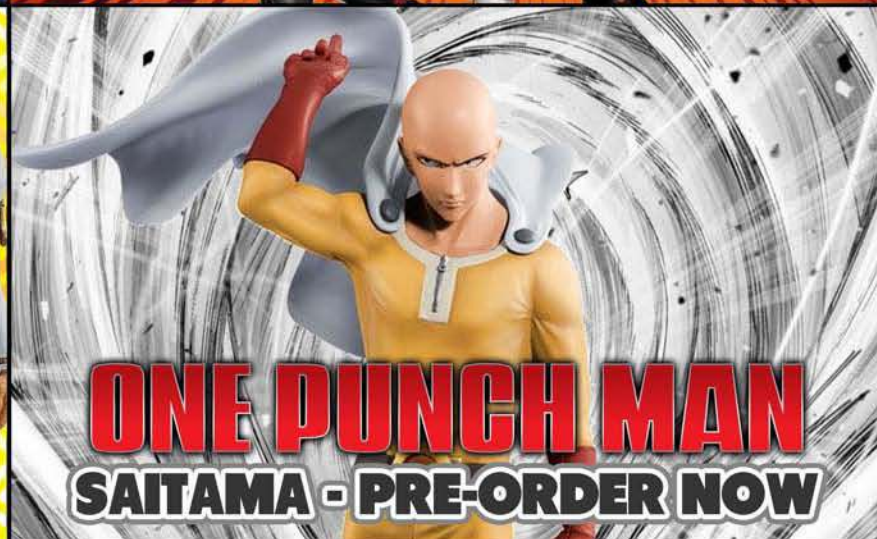
★★★★☆

YOUR EARS DON'T DECEIVE YOU!

Miyu's English dub voice actress actually changes early into the show – Kimberly J Brown provides her voice for the first seven episodes, while Dorothy Elias-Fahn takes over for the rest.

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WORDS BY MICHAEL DODSON



SUPER SMASH BROS. ULTIMATE

OUT NOW // FIGHTING // £59.99 (SWITCH) // 12 // PUBLISHER NINTENDO // DEVELOPER BANDAI NAMCO STUDIOS / SORA LTD

PLOT *Smash Bros. Ultimate* sees every fighter and nearly every stage from previous entries make a glorious return. Along with 900+ music tracks and a healthy number of modes and unlockables, this truly is the ultimate crossover.

Smash Bros director Masahiro Sakurai has gone on record to say that this may well be the last title in the series he's in charge of, and if that really is the case, then what a send off he has put together in *Ultimate*! Series veterans such as Mario, Samus and Pikachu have all been given a lick of paint and subtle tweaks, whilst characters not seen since *Mélée* on the GameCube such as Young Link can now battle it out with

newcomers including *Splatoon*'s Inkling and long-requested *Metroid* villain Ridley.

In addition to the many opportunities for customising versus matches both on- and offline, *Ultimate* also offers some excellent single player options, including a revamped Classic mode, which is now different for each fighter, and an extensive single player adventure, which does a fantastic job in referencing even obscure corners of Nintendo's history.

Yes, we did miss a few of the staples from earlier titles, such as trophy collecting and Break the Targets, but as an overall package, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* is easily the biggest *Smash* game yet, and one on which many players will rack up 100s of hours of play time.

A love letter to Nintendo's extensive history, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* is the series' best instalment yet. ●

★★★★★

DLC

Despite its already generous size, *Ultimate* isn't done yet – six new paid DLC characters have already been promised for next year (personally, we want Rex from *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*!).

WORDS BY MICHAEL DODSON



POKÉMON: LET'S GO, EEVEE!

Game Boy Classic Evolved

OUT NOW // CERT 7 // RPG // £49.99 (SWITCH) // PUBLISHER THE POKÉMON COMPANY / NINTENDO // DEVELOPER GAME FREAK

In this pseudo remake of 2000's *Pokémon Yellow*, though many elements of the original Game Boy game are apparent, seasoned players will immediately notice changes that have streamlined certain systems.

Some of these are for the better – being able to see Pokémon wandering around in the wild, for example, is a huge improvement. Some players may miss battling wild Pokémon (*Let's Go* employs a capturing system very similar to the mobile game), but we enjoyed how quick it made wild encounters. In fact, battles against NPC trainers, which are fairly underwhelming graphically and now award less XP than ever before, were one of our least favourite parts of the game.

All in all, *Let's Go* was a welcome nostalgic hit for us, and an interesting experiment in mobile game crossovers.

Heartily recommended for newcomers to the franchise as a no-frills entry point, though series veterans may find certain areas lacking. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY DAVID WEST



THE SPY GONE NORTH

OUT NOW // SIGNATURE ENTERTAINMENT // CERT 12 // DRAMA // VOD £4.49 (RENT), £9.99 (BUY) // 137 MINS

In the 1990s, North Korea's withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty worries officials in the South, so the National Intelligence Service sends Park Suk-young (Hwang Jung-min, star of *The Wailing*, *Ode to My Father*, *A Violent Prosecutor*, *Veteran*, and more) to infiltrate the North.

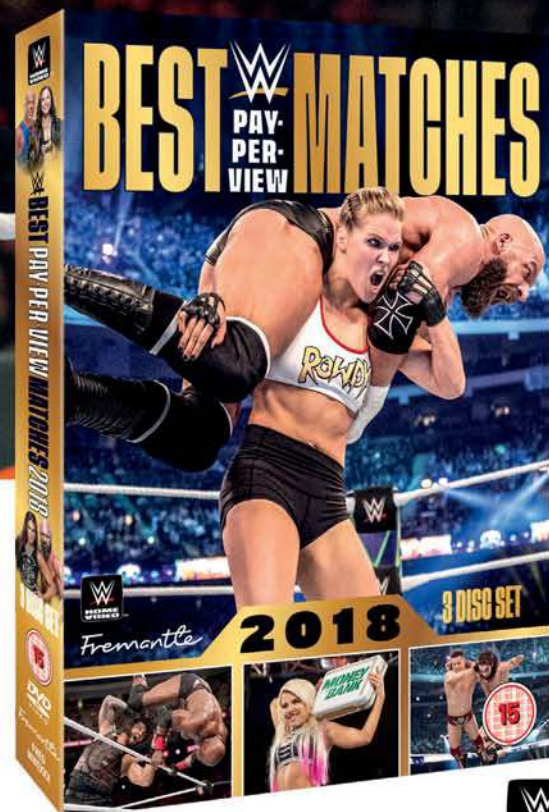
Posing as a greedy businessman, Park approaches Northern official Ri Myong-un (Lee Sung-min: *Golden Time*, *Broken* and *Misaeng: Incomplete Life*) but events in the South throw his mission into turmoil. Yoon Jong-bin's drama has none of the action tropes of standard spy thrillers – there are no car chases or shootouts. Instead, it's a study of the painstaking, slow process of infiltrating a hostile power that offers a neat twist via the changing dynamic between Park and Ri.

At times the plotting feels overly precise, but there's a constant undercurrent of tension and the two leads are excellent. ●

★★★★★



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WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

NEO RELEASE ROUND-UP

THE STATE OF THE UK MARKET THIS MONTH

THE BIG DECEMBER gift packages are both deluxe editions of old favourites (though be warned, both have three-figure price tags). First, there's the latest Anime Limited "Ultimate Edition" – it's the very excellent space adventure series *Cowboy Bebop* in a set that includes the TV series and movie on Blu-ray, three soundtrack CDs, a 120-page art book and oodles of on-disc extras (commentaries, featurettes and so-forth). They're bundled in vinyl-styled slipcases that are themselves contained in a snazzy-looking flight case. It's sold exclusively through the Zavvi and AlltheAnime websites, and should be released around 17 December. Keep an eye out under those Christmas trees...

Second, as we mentioned last month, there's the 30th Anniversary Edition of Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbour Totoro*. It was a bit delayed after our last issue went to print, but should be available now from Studio Canal, carrying the film on Blu-ray and DVD, the *Art of My Neighbour Totoro* book, plus posters, artcards, a tote bag and magnetic stickers (though the thought of magnetic Totoros is a bit weird to us).

If your budget won't stretch to that, Studio Canal is also reissuing two Ghibli film as Blu-ray Steelbooks, Miyazaki's *Porco Rosso* and Yoshifumi Kondo's *Whisper of the Heart*, both due 17 December. They tend to get a bit overlooked behind the *Mononokes* and *Spiriteds* but they're well worth checking – especially *Whisper*, a languidly-paced school drama from a girl's perspective, especially recommended if you love Kyoto Animation.

Manga Entertainment's big December releases should be already available or just hitting the shelves. If you're suffering withdrawal from the "split" third TV season of *Titan*, there's *Kabaneri of the Iron Fortress* to consider (Blu-ray / DVD combo, reviewed this issue). Luffy returns with *One Piece Collection 20* (DVD) on 17 December, and *Naruto Shippuden Box 35* (DVD) is due 14 January.

14 January is also the date of *Dragon Ball Z Broly Trilogy* (DVD), three adventures with the eponymous supervillain Broly... nicely timed to coincide with the cinema release of *Dragon Ball Super: Broly*, also in January.



1. Not as showy as some of its Ghibli siblings, *Whisper of the Heart* is an underrated classic. 2. Well, pigs really can fly in *Porco Rosso*! 3. Turn to page 072 for our review of MVM's classic *Vampire Princess Miyu*. 4. Available in the new year is Mari Okada's gorgeous *Maquia: When The Promised Flower Blooms*.

Then there's the return of old skullface, otherwise known as *Overlord II* – the adventures of the Dark Lord continue as a Blu-ray / DVD on 21 January. If you prefer vampires to skeletons, MVM has a reissue of *Vampire Princess Miyu* on the same date.

Peeking slightly further ahead, 28 January releases should include Manga's *Dragon Ball Super Part 6* (DVD / Blu-ray); MVM releasing *Higurashi's* first season as a Blu-ray; and, with luck, the long-awaited release of Mari Okada's *Maquia* from Anime Limited as a Blu-ray, DVD and Collector's combo. So it may be worth keeping back some of that Christmas money...●



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[FILM REVIEW]

ZATOICHI – THE BLIND SWORDSMAN

Justice is blind but deadly

OUT NOW // THE CRITERION COLLECTION / SONY // CERT 15 // ACTION // £219.99 (BLU-RAY) // 2176 MINS // 25 MOVIES

PLOT This box set collects the original 25 film series starring Shintaro Katsu as Zatoichi, the blind swordsman. Making his living as a travelling masseur and sometime gambler, Zatoichi is a lethal fighter despite his sightlessness, feared as much as loathed by the yakuza that he invariably runs into trouble with.

Released from 1962 to 1973, the *Zatoichi* series is a remarkable body of work that really has no equal in the history of the chanbara genre. There were other popular series about swordsmen – *Lone Wolf And Cub*, *Hanzo The Razor*, *The Sleepy Eyes Of Death* for example – but none of them came close to the longevity of *Zatoichi*. Its popularity was so enduring that after the 25th film the series moved to television for three seasons.

It's true that the longer the movies continued, the more they were in danger of repeating themselves, and it's fair to say there is a basic formula at work, but what keeps the whole venture engaging is Shintaro Katsu's performance. Forget Takeshi Kitano's detached, post-modern take on the character in his 2003 *Zatoichi* film, Kitano simply can't compare to Katsu in the role. Zatoichi is the great underdog of chanbara cinema. His blindness puts him at

the very bottom of feudal Japan's rigid social hierarchy and throughout the series he has to deal with samurai who think nothing of insulting him or trying to shove him around.

Part of the appeal of Zatoichi is how he always turns the tables, leaving would-be tormentors humiliated or, if they're so foolhardy as to attack him, dead in the dirt. Katsu is brilliant, filling the character with warmth, humility and compassion, qualities that Katsu himself did not necessarily possess in abundance. He often falls in love – in *The New Tale Of Zatoichi* he's smitten with Yayoi (Mikiko Tsubouchi), the beautiful sister of his old swordsmanship instructor Banno (Seizaburo Kawazu). For a blind man, Zatoichi has a remarkable knack for picking particularly attractive love interests. Inevitably Banno refuses to let his sister demean herself by marrying an itinerant masseur.

A recurring plot device is for Zatoichi to face another swordsman in mortal combat at the climax of a movie and usually it's not someone that Zatoichi takes any pleasure in fighting. In the case of Banno, Zatoichi knows it will be the end of his relationship with Yayoi, who'll never marry him if he kills her brother. But he's trapped in his life of violence. He's often pursued by people seeking vengeance for those he's slain in the past, so he must either fight to protect himself, or die.

He's quite different to characters like Itto Ogami from *Lone Wolf And Cub* or Yuki from *Lady Snowblood*, whose lives are completely defined by their quests for revenge. What Zatoichi really wants is a peaceful life, but there are

EXTRAS

The set includes John Nathan's 1978 documentary about Shintaro Katsu, shot during production of the *Zatoichi* TV series. Katsu seems belligerent, demanding and impatient, but appears lonely when he's drunk.



times when he's roused to anger and unleashes the deadly avenger that rests within the humble masseur. In *Zatoichi's Flashing Sword*, he takes retribution on the greedy yakuza boss Yasugoro (Tatsuo Endo) who murders another clan in cold blood. "It's not the place of a yakuza to go strutting around in broad daylight like he owns the world," scolds Zatoichi. "A proper yakuza bows his head and politely yields the way to the common folk."

"...KATSU IS BRILLIANT, FILLING THE CHARACTER WITH WARMTH, HUMILITY AND COMPASSION, QUALITIES THAT KATSU HIMSELF DID NOT NECESSARILY POSSESS IN ABUNDANCE."

There are other instances where he hires himself out as a swordsman – in *Zatoichi On The Road* he agrees to fight in a yakuza turf war for money, but in the end he kills both gang bosses, disgusted by their treacherous behaviour. In the same movie he takes it upon himself to protect Omitsu (Shiho Fujimura), who is on the run from the retainers of a lord that she stabbed with a hairpin when he tried to rape her. It's hard to believe that Katsu, so likeable as Zatoichi,

starred in *Hanzo The Razor*, one of the nastiest chanbara series, full of rape scenes.

As Zatoichi's adventures continued, there were attempts to put a fresh spin on the formula by bringing in famous guest stars. *Zatoichi Meets Yojimbo*, from 1970, pulls together the considerable talents of Katsu and Toshiro Mifune, although it's actually one of the weaker entries. That's all the more surprising given that it was directed by Kihachi Okamoto, who made such classic chanbara films as *Samurai Assassin* and *Red Lion*. The problem is largely that, despite the title, Mifune isn't playing the same character here as the wandering ronin he portrayed for Akira Kurosawa in *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro*, while the script struggles to find a compelling reason to have the two leads face off.

The fight scenes are a reliable highlight. Katsu is very fast on the draw, although some of the supporting cast tend to ham it up when it's their turn to die. The early films use no special effects or sound design to enhance the fights, relying on the skill of the performers. While it never becomes as gory as *Lone Wolf And Cub*, by Zatoichi's *Flashing Sword* in 1964, the fake blood is starting to flow and the sound ringing of steel accents the sword strokes.

Don't be intimidated by the hefty price tag – with 25 films this collection more than delivers your money's worth. The Blu-ray transfers are beautiful and crisp, Zatoichi is the most human and sympathetic of action heroes, while his fight scenes are thrilling even when they're bloodless. ●

★★★★★

IF YOU LIKE THIS

To see Shintaro Katsu acting with his eyes open, try Hideo Gosha's brilliant *Tenchu* (aka *Hitokiri*) from 1969, and his performance in Kazuo Kuroki's *Roningai*, from 1990, is magnificent.

MANGA EXTRACT

PATCHWORK SKY

By Morag Lewis

THIS ISSUE, THANKS to Morag Lewis of Sweatdrop Studios, we have an extract from her work *Patchwork Sky* to share with you! We asked Lewis to tell us what action readers could expect from the following pages. "Kite and Saryth have come to Kirmouth in search of Pyetr, one of Kite's people who has gone missing," she tells us. "In this extract they have just met up with Jig, who travelled with them some years before. Jig and Kite follow Pyetr's trail, but the clues they find point in a disturbing direction."

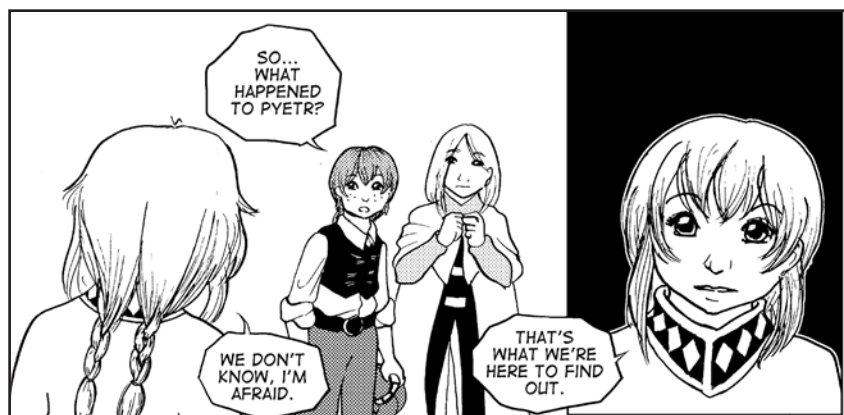
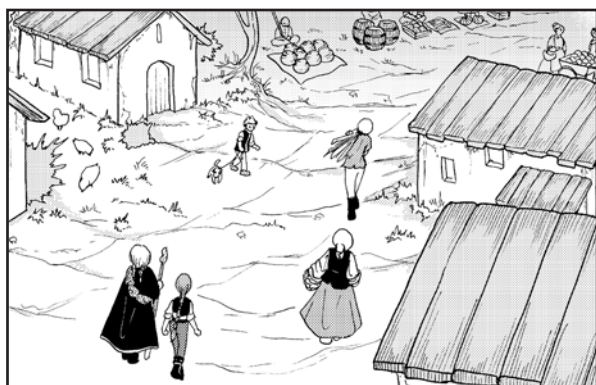
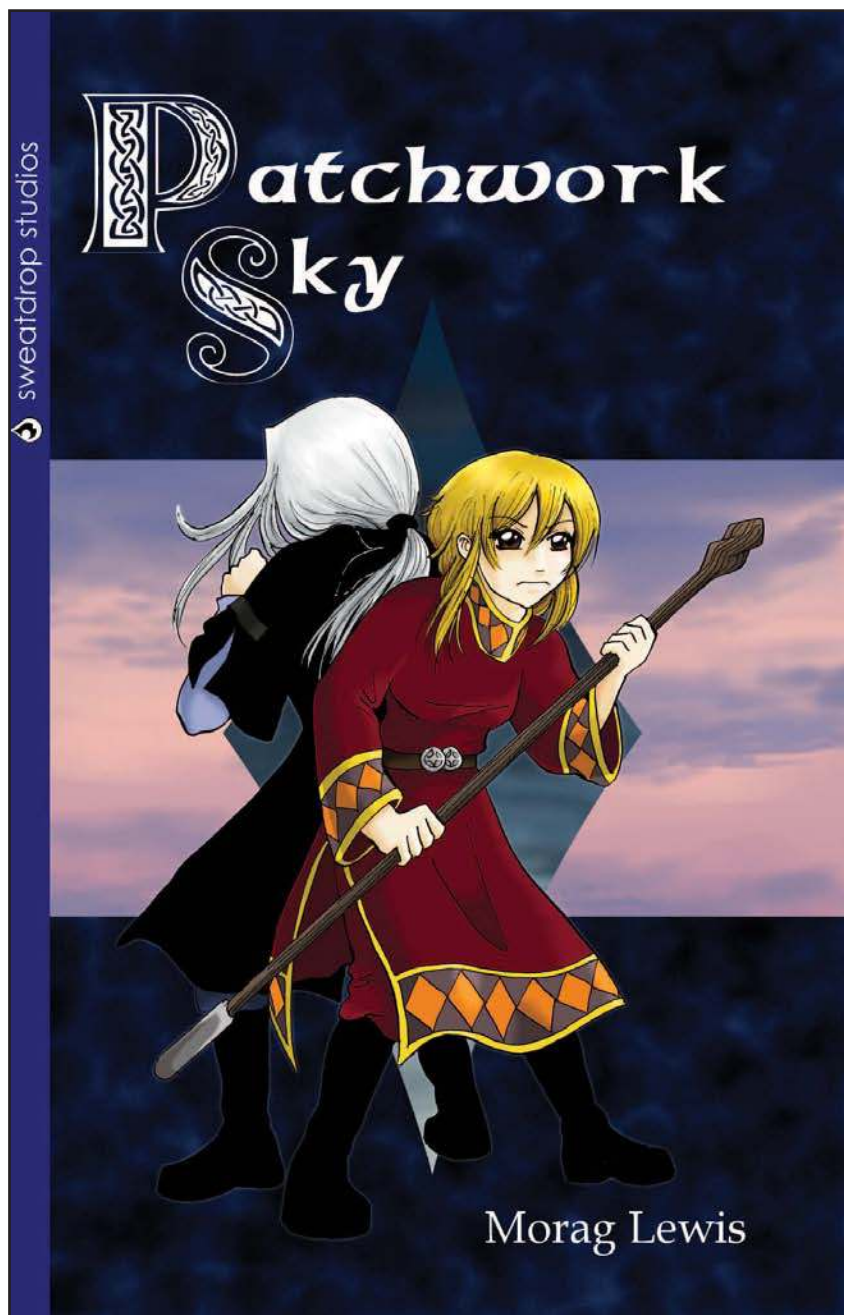
Of the overall story of the series, Lewis adds, "Kite is from a race of world-walkers, people who can travel between the worlds. She takes on assignments for her people to maintain the gateways between the worlds, mostly courier runs. Her current assignment is to find Pyetr, the keeper of the gateway in Araithel. Araithel is Saryth's home world, but he left some years ago with Kite when she set him free from captivity. He was held because he is a sorcerer, marked by his white hair (hence Jig's comments about his hat, and the need for hair dye). Given this history, Kite is worried for Saryth almost as much as she is for Pyetr."

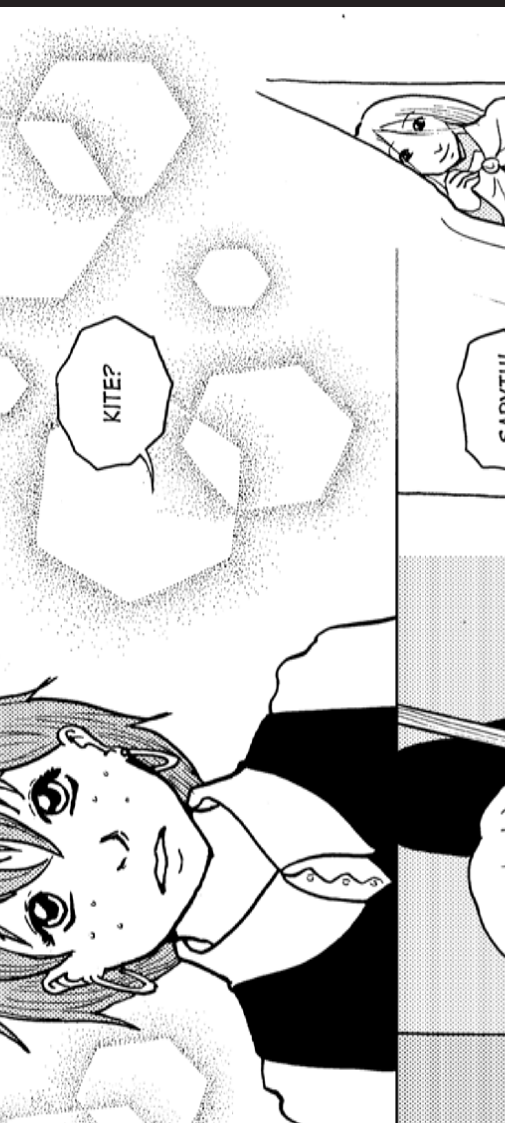
One of our favourite things about Lewis' work is her beautifully realised costuming for her characters, so we asked her about where she drew her inspiration for them. "Oh, that's hard to answer! Kite and Saryth have been around for years. Her clothes are vaguely Indian in style (long side-split skirts with loose trousers), and the patterns around neck, cuffs and hems are familial. I can't place what Saryth's current clothes are based on, I'm afraid. He's had several outfits, so perhaps they're still evolving!"

We were also fascinated with the use of magic in the series, so we asked Lewis to tell us more about how she had woven that concept into the tale, and whether there were any challenges. "Magic is fun because it gives a single character the chance to make a big difference to a world without being some kind of ruler (which comes with quite a lot of restrictions, story-wise). The biggest challenge for any magic system is keeping the limitations consistent, and with a story like this, which has more than ten years behind it, I have a lot of opportunities to be inconsistent!"

Finally, we asked Lewis if she could share with us her current ongoing projects, and let readers know where she can find them online! "A *Pocketful of Clouds* is my current webcomic, and I am also working on *Defenders of the Sunset City*, a comparatively short fantasy story. Both will finish next year. I am planning on doing more of the *Mini Murder Mysteries*, and I am very keen to get to the next chapter of *Patchwork Sky*! Everything can be found at toothycat.net, and most comics can be bought from Sweatdrop Studios (sweatdrop.com)."

Enjoy the extract on *Patchwork Sky* on the following pages!







SO...
WHAT
HAPPENED
TO PYETR?

WE DON'T
KNOW, I'M
AFRAID.

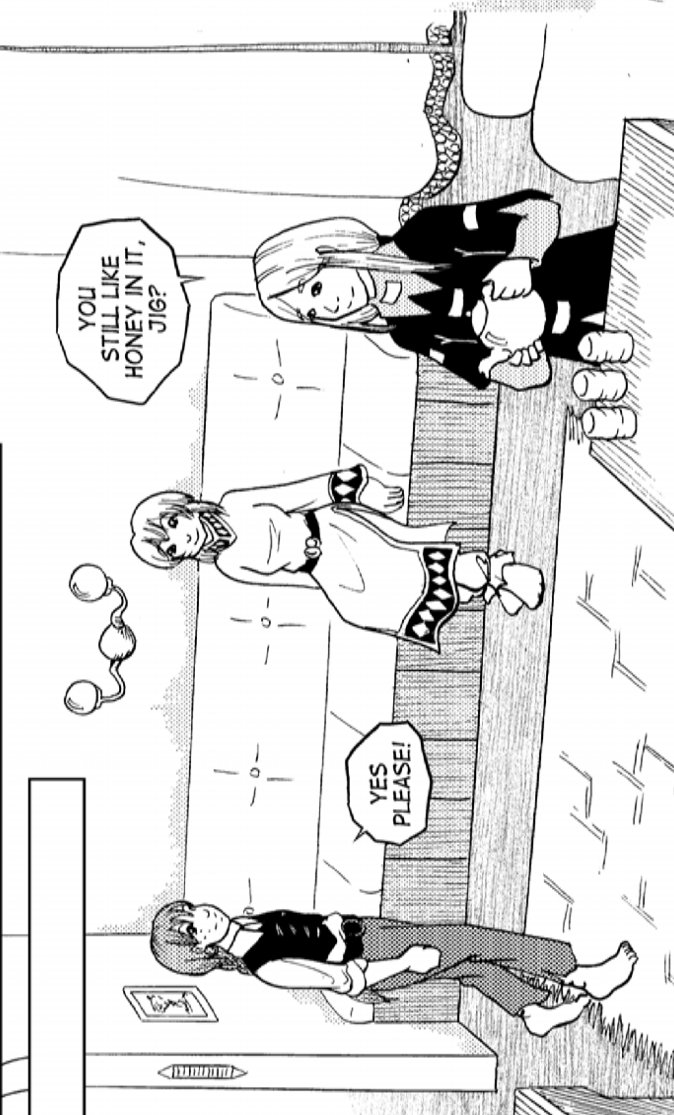
THAT'S
WHAT WE'RE
HERE TO FIND
OUT.



SO WHAT
HAPPENED?

THE OLD
LADY ON THE
CORNER SAID
PYETR HASN'T
BEEN HERE
FOR AGES.

... SHE ALSO
SAID SOME
SUSPICIOUS
PEOPLE HAD
MOVED IN.



YOU
STILL LIKE
HONEY IN IT,
JIG?

YES
PLEASE!

I'VE
MISSED
PYETR'S
TEA.



WE CAME
TO CHECK ON
PYETR AFTER
NOT HEARING
FROM HIM FOR
A WHILE.

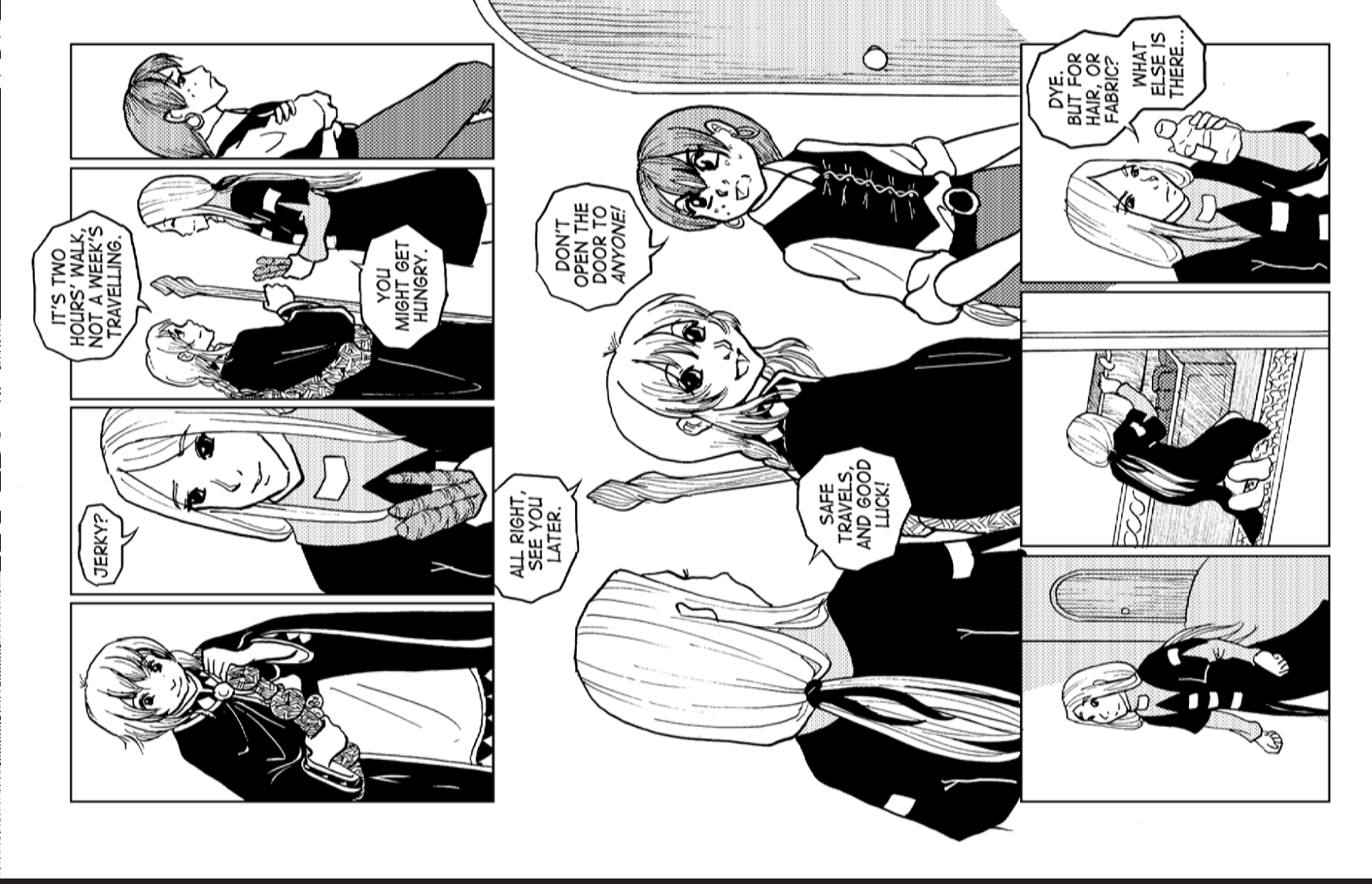
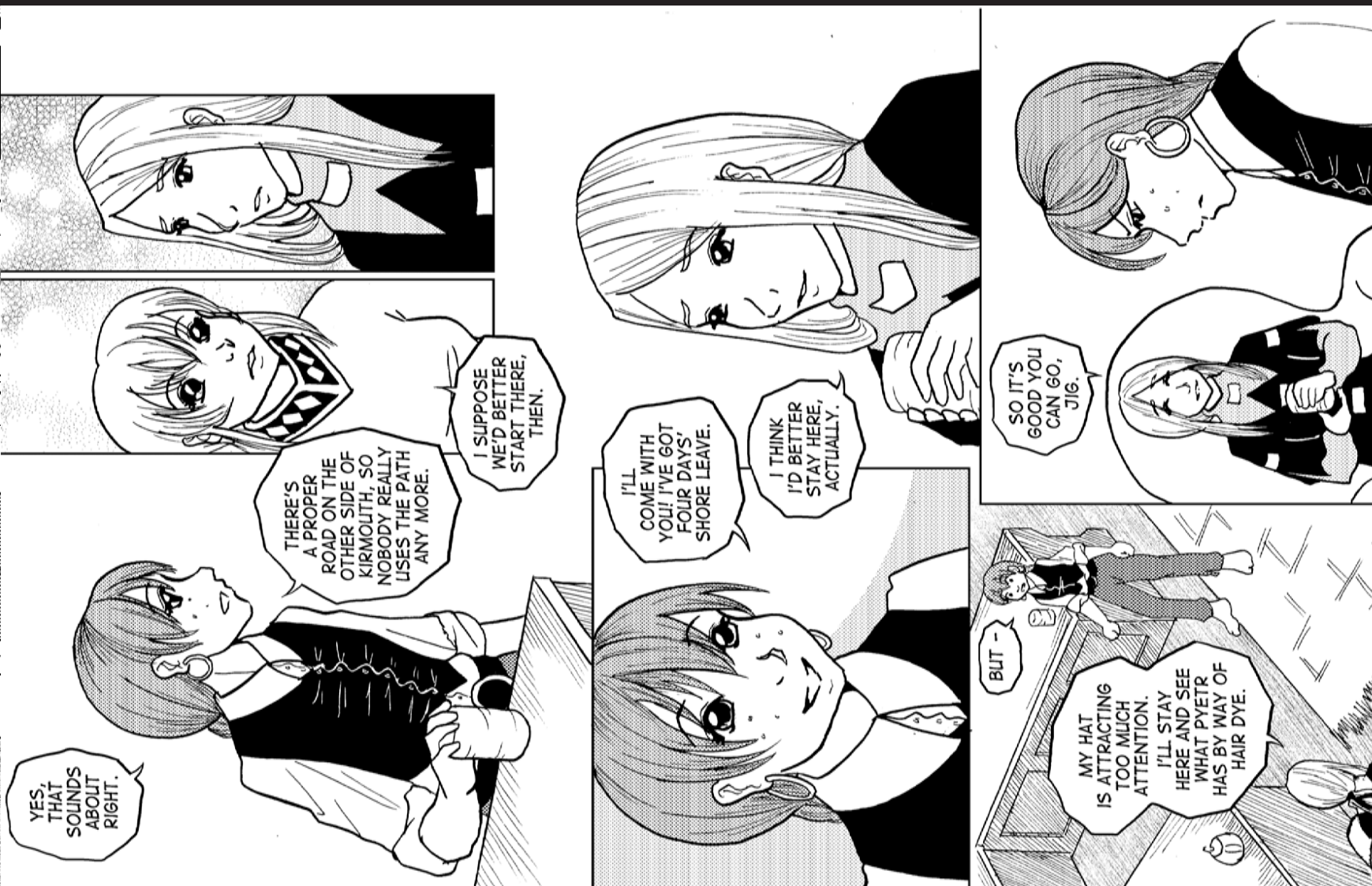
THREE
WEEKS AGO,
HE WENT UP TO
THE HILL OUTSIDE
KIRMOUTH TO
THE NORTH-
WEST.
AND
THEN HE
APPEARS
TO HAVE
VANISHED.

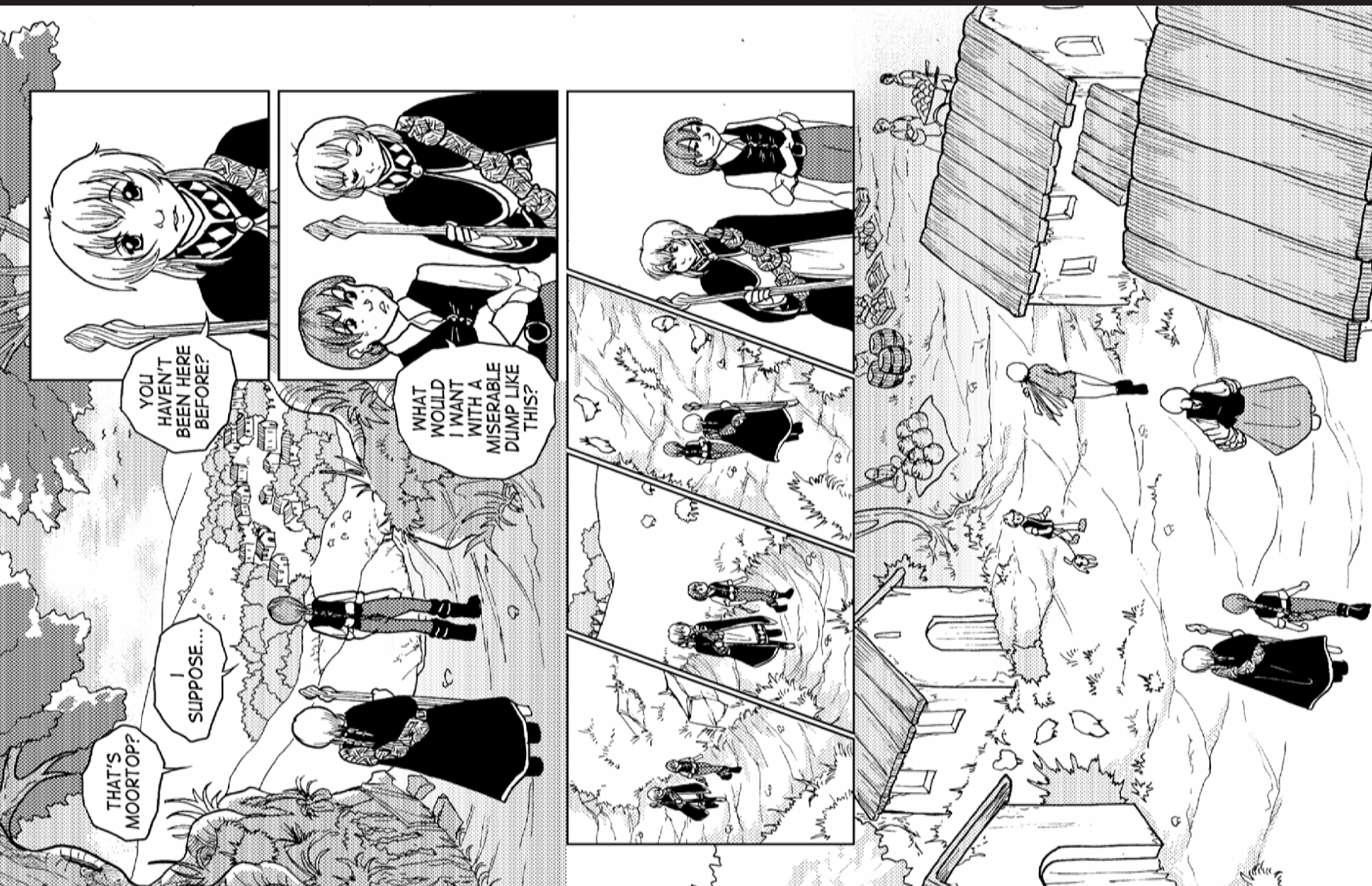
IS THAT
THE PATH TO
MOORTOP?

MOORTOP?



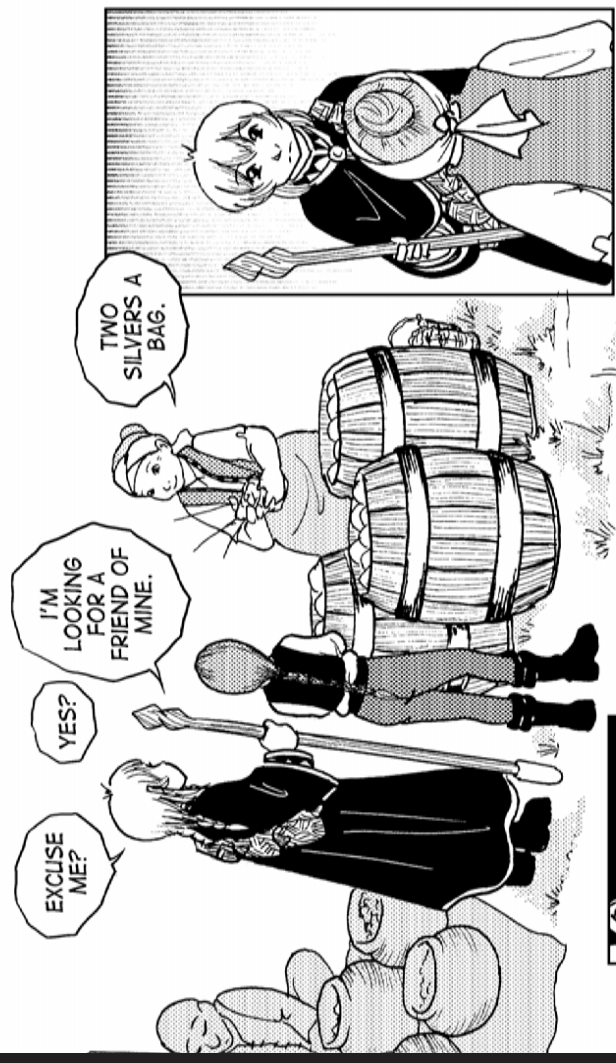
IT'S JUST
A FOOTPATH.
IT'S NOT BIG
ENOUGH FOR
A CART OR
ANYTHING.





I SUPPOSE...

YOU HAVEN'T BEEN HERE BEFORE?



YES?

I'M LOOKING FOR A FRIEND OF MINE.

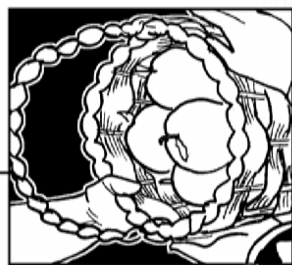
TWO SILVERS A BAG.



WHO'RE YOU LOOKING FOR?

MY FRIEND PYETR.

NEVER HEARD OF HIM.



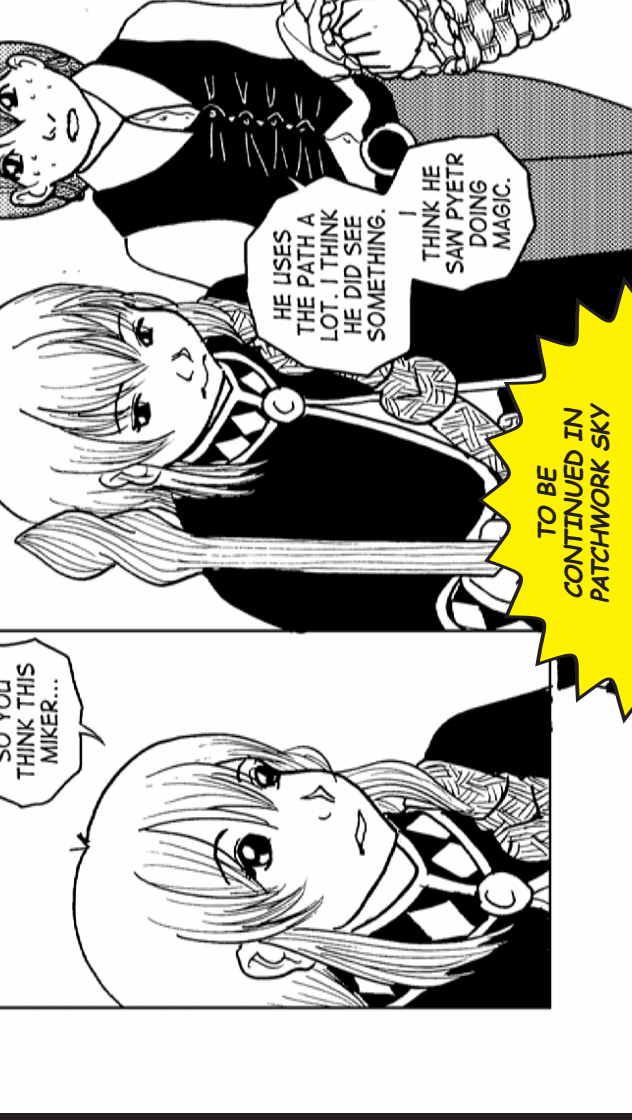
YOU KNOW ANYONE CALLED PYETR?

HEY, TOMATH!

NO, NOBODY OF THAT NAME HERE.

HE LIVES IN KIRMOUTH.





TO BE
CONTINUED IN
PATCHWORK SKY

NEXT ISSUE



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Focused on the adventuring guild known as Loki Familia, the show follows a similar theme of fantasy adventuring to the first series (also called *DanMachi*), and even features some crossover characters, as the lead is none other than Aiz Wallenstein, the knight who saved Bell Cranel! Discover a whole new perspective on the world of *DanMachi* in this amazing side quest adventure. Act soon to guarantee your copy, and sign up for a year of NEO at a bargain price!

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PERSONA 3 AND 5 EXPLAINED!

Want to get your groove on but don't know where to start?
Here's our handy guide to the franchise!

First of all: don't panic. Like many labyrinthine Japanese franchises, the *Persona* series can seem intimidating to the newcomer, but don't let that put you off! The *Persona* games are a spin-off from Atlus' mammoth *Shin Megami Tensei* franchise – role playing games originally based on a sci-fi novel series by Aya Nishitani, entitled *Digital Devil Story*. The *Megami Tensei* titles are generally stand-alone entries in the franchise, and the *Persona* games follow the same concept. These games are linked thematically, have gameplay elements in common, and each main series game can be enjoyed without prior knowledge of the others, so you can partake of the action whether you're a hardcore fan or just dipping your toes in!

CORE CONCEPTS

The name of the series gives a clue as to the central linking concept of each entry into the franchise: the Personas. Characters in the game can create these beings to battle for them, and they manifest themselves based on the characters' personalities. *Persona* goes deep here, drawing elements from analytical psychology, also known as Jungian psychology, to inform its concepts and imagery. (Jungian psychology is named after its founder, Carl Jung, a prominent student of Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology.) In fact, the word 'persona' comes from the Latin 'personae', which means 'mask' – although in the games, the Personas are represented to be more like the true self, and the mask the characters wear is the everyday face they show to those around them.

Analytical psychology is concerned with the concept of the pursuit

of wholeness, which can only be attained by truly coming to terms with yourself. What that means in real life is careful and considered analysis of communications that exist in the form of metaphors or symbolism, transmitted to your conscious self by your unconscious being. But we're not here for that! In game terms, it means battling using your Persona – your inner self – against Shadows, which prey on humans, although the specifics of the conflict and the nature of the Personas and the enemies can change from game to game.

Along with these role playing elements, the series also bases action on Simulation games, and each setting is based in a high school and follows a group of students as they battle through their specific conflicts. As the player character, you have to not only fight the forces of evil, but also attend school and build relationships, which will help you in your quest.

PERSONA 3

Persona 3 debuted on the PSP in April 2011 in Europe. The story revolves around a group of students at Gekkoukan High School that the player character joins, called the Specialist Extracurricular Execution Squad (also called SEES). The majority of the battling action takes place in the main dungeon called Tatarus – which mysteriously appears during the Dark Hour in place of Gekkoukan High. That Dark Hour is a time period between two days that most people don't even realise exists, except for those chosen ones, who can freely move within it and keep those evil forces at bay.

In *Persona 3*, the Personas take their influences from the Tarot, as in some



“CONSIDERING THAT THE *PERSONA* GAMES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN WELL KNOWN FOR THEIR CATCHY MUSIC, AND SLICK SENSE OF STYLE, PORTING THOSE ELEMENTS TO A SERIES OF RHYTHM GAMES MAKES A WHOLE LOT OF SENSE FOR FANS!”

previous titles, and as the main character, the player can wield more than one – and even create more by fusing together different Personas in the Velvet Room. That Velvet Room is a special location between the real world and the dream realm that the protagonist can transport to, and has appeared in all of the previous *Persona* games – sometimes with a different appearance, but always inhabited by Igor – a helpful chap with a rather impressive nose, whose main role is to assist the player character and inform them of important plot and gameplay elements. *Persona 3* also introduced the ‘Social Links’ element of gameplay with great success, where interacting with the characters bestowed bonuses or incurred penalties, depending on the player’s responses.

PERSONA 5

Restore civilization with the Phantom Thieves of Hearts! *Persona* returned triumphantly to the scene in 2017 with the launch of *Persona 5* in the UK – and this time the characters actually wore masks! Instead of battling against Shadows, the game went back to its roots in the original *Persona* game and sees you battle against demons. One of the core themes of the game is the struggle of mankind against the chains that prevent them from achieving their potential, and the Phantom Thieves battle in a parallel realm called the Metaverse, accessed via a mobile app, where the enemy Shadows consist of humanity’s desires. Taking clear inspiration from the picaresque novel, the games used those themes of rebellion and subversion against a corrupt society in order to inform their cast of characters, enemies and Personas.

Crawling through the plot-progressing Palace dungeons and the randomly-generated Mementos dungeons, the game also introduces stealth elements alongside the traditional turn-based combat system. Other locations in the game include real life places in Tokyo, like Shibuya, Akihabara and Shinjuku.

Persona 5 was released to critical acclaim, hailed as one of the best RPGs of all time, and in Japan and the rest of the world, it was the fastest selling instalment

of the franchise. By the end of 2017, the game had sold over two million units, and scooped countless awards for everything from art direction to music.

DANCING ALL NIGHT

All of that brings us to the spin-offs – and considering that the *Persona* games have always been well known for their catchy music, and slick sense of style, porting those elements to a series of rhythm games makes a whole lot of sense for fans! *Persona* first dipped its toe into the rhythm game world in 2015, with the release of *Persona 4: Dancing All Night* on the PlayStation Vita. After that game proved a success, it was only a matter of time before other more recent instalments in the franchise got their own rhythm game adaptations – which you can read about in our main flipper feature! *Persona 3: Dancing in Moonlight* and *Persona 5: Dancing in Starlight* are both out in the UK from SEGA now for the PS4. ●



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DANCING IN THE MOONLIGHT

“Dance is the hidden language of the soul”, said the American dancer and choreographer Martha Graham. NEO’s David West talks to producer Kazuhisa Wada about how the *Persona* franchise is expanding beyond its RPG origins to dance under the moon and stars in two new rhythm titles.



Wada On Social Mode

"It's the first time in the series that a first-person point of view is used during dialogue. We paid close attention to the characters' expressions and subtle movements, so please unlock the Social events as you dance to the beat and enjoy all the conversations with the characters you love."

The *Persona* series is beloved amongst gamers for blending elements from RPG dungeon crawlers with social simulation gameplay. Then in 2015, the franchise took a left turn into the realm of rhythm games with the spin-off title *Persona 4: Dancing All Night*. Now the Specialist Extracurricular Execution Squad from *Persona 3* and the Phantom Thieves from *Persona 5* will take their places on the dancefloor and strut their stuff in two new titles – *Persona 3: Dancing In Moonlight* and *Persona 5: Dancing In Starlight*. To learn how one of Japan's most revered RPGs made the jump to rhythm games, NEO turned to producer Kazuhisa Wada who is a long-time fan of the *Persona* games, first developed by ATLUS as an offshoot of the *Megami Tensei* RPG series from the 1980s.

"My interest in ATLUS stemmed from *Shin Megami Tensei*, the Super Famicom game," says Wada. "Captivated by the game's packaging, I purchased a copy during my high school days and was instantly drawn into the deep world of

'Megaten'. I was interested in *Persona* when I was a college student, but back then I only owned a Sega Saturn, and with *Persona* being on the PlayStation, I couldn't play it at the time. I joined ATLUS and was assigned to work on cutscenes for *Persona 2 Sin*, and the rest is history."

BEYOND ROLEPLAY

History it may be, but the *Persona* franchise has expanded in unexpected directions since its inception. There was the fighting game *Persona 4 Arena*, which was all about the action, before *Persona 4: Dancing All Night* replaced fisticuffs with getting your groove on.

"When thinking about the branding of the series, I wanted more people to become familiar with *Persona*, but the RPGs produced by ATLUS take a significant amount of time and I felt that they weren't enough for the brand," says Wada.

"Furthermore, we all felt a drive to create more games in different genres. We first gave fighting games a shot, as that is a genre which both [artist and character designer Shigenori] Soejima and I enjoy. Once we saw the success of that decision, we decided to branch out to other genres, including a rhythm game. The *Persona* franchise is acclaimed for its music and has even held many successful live concerts in the past, so we had thought it would be a great match for quite some time."

Wada and his team, which includes character designer Soejima, game director Nobuyoshi Miwa, and composer Ryota Kozuka, worked on both games simultaneously, which brought its own challenges. "It was way more difficult than I had imagined," says Wada laughing. "There was never enough time. While we were able to work simultaneously on some processes, we needed to focus on the games individually during the review process, so it was difficult allocating time for both. On the plus side, the development work was very efficient."

The two new titles aim to build upon the experience of





Megaten

The *Megami Tensei* or 'Megaten' games were based on the *Digital Devil Story* science fiction novel series by Japanese author Aya Nishitani. The first game, the rather clumsily titled *Digital Devil Story: Megami Tensei*, was released on Nintendo's Famicom console in 1987 and *Revelations: Persona* launched the *Persona* franchise in 1996 on the original PlayStation.



Persona 4: Dancing All Night, including moving away from having a story arc towards putting the spotlight on the characters and their relationships.

"We utilized some of the feedback that would improve the rhythm game playability and brushed up on the dance moves that were popular in the first game," says Wada about fan reactions. "We also aimed to create a wider variety of music by expanding the arrangers' body of sounds. Additionally, we took an experimental approach by reformatting the story mode of the last game into a Social mode, which we thought would better match the rhythm game's looping gameplay style. The concept was a character-centric project where you have the chance to learn more about these people as you play the game, so we focused on light-hearted character interaction in lieu of a serious story arc."

SONG AND DANCE

As the songs play, the characters, whether they hail from from the Specialist Extracurricular Execution Squad or the Phantom



Thieves, take to the dancefloor to perform their routines. These had to be created and captured using real people to bring them to life in the games.

"We primarily casted returning dancers from *P4D*, as they are wonderful performers who played the games thoroughly and have an exceptional understanding of the characters and the series," says Wada.

"For the last game, we held an audition and chose our dancers not only on skill, but on how well their styles fit our characters. The time it took to put together and capture routines varied depending on the song. The general flow was: first, the dancers and the choreography director, KAZOO, would come up with the routines. Next, our dev team's [Teppei] Kobayashi would add character-specific details to the routines during rehearsal. Finally, we would proceed with the actual motion capture, some of which were more difficult than others. All the dancers worked very hard during their time on this project. The partner dance sequences had many variations, so those >>>

1. Presumably they're both listening to the same song on their headphones, or this could be awkward. 2. United by rhythm – the goofy Junpei and the abrasive Akihiko... 3. The protagonist weaves a musical spell while Dancing In Moonlight. 4. Costumes designed by Iron, apparently.



The Designer

Shigenori Soejima has been character designer on the series since 2006's *Persona 3* on the PlayStation 2. In addition to the games, he's been the character designer for the *Persona* anime adaptations which began with *Persona: Trinity Soul* in 2008. *Persona 5: The Animation* was released in Japan earlier this year.

>>> were particularly challenging.”

The games feature songs by Shoji Meguro, who's been creating music for ATLUS titles since the 1990s, and composer Ryota Kozuka, whose credits include working on the *Shin Megami Tensei* series. Plus, the soundtracks include remixes by a host of Japanese DJs and EDM producers and it was vital, from the start of development, to make sure that the songs match the personalities of the dancers.

"P3 has a long history and quite a sizeable discography, so it was relatively easy to pick out songs to match up with the characters," says Wada. "P5, on the other hand, was more difficult due to the fact that there aren't as many P5 songs, let alone ones with vocals – I recall having a hard time matching up songs to the characters. In that sense, I was looking forward to the variations that the remixes would yield, as I believed that their individual visions would add up to a great outcome. While we didn't finish every single track before entering development, we tried to get as ahead as we could. There's no way you can start making a rhythm game without any songs, right?"

It was Wada and Meguro who chose Ryota Kozuka to be the lead composer this time around. “The main reason for this is because the project contains many remixes, with most of the songs originally composed by Meguro, so we thought the outcome would be more interesting if someone who wasn’t Meguro provided the bulk of the remixes,” says Wada.

*Although there are two self-remixed songs included this time, we gave him complete freedom on the direction of those tracks. As for Kozuka, we had him overlook everything sound-related, including new songs, remixes, and score creation. Personally, I'm very fond of the OP songs – through them, I was

able to see Kozuka's unmeasurable talent and potential firsthand."

DANCEFLOOR FASHIONS

Anyone heading out to hit the clubs knows you don't show up in your everyday threads and the cast members from *Persona 3* and *Persona 5* have new outfits to show off as they light up the dancefloor. "The new designs were created in collaboration with the 2D art team, led by Soejima," explains Wada. "Once we figure out what types of costumes we'd like to incorporate into the project, we send our rough requests over to the art team. They develop concept art that we review with the engineering team, as their input is crucial - at times, we come up with interesting costumes that may not be feasible for dance movements in-game, so the engineering team keeps us grounded."

However, it seems the creators aren't keeping a close eye on the latest fashion trends in Japan. "That is actually lower in our list of initial priorities, as we tend to set the designs in line with the game's theme first," says Wada. "After that, the art team's staff members incorporate their individual preferences into the designs, and that is the point where fashion trends may begin to appear in the design."

One question hanging over both the new rhythm games is whether or not the fans who love the RPG aspects of the *Persona* series can be tempted to try something new. While *Persona 4: Dancing All Night* was clearly a hit or *Persona 3: Dancing In Moonlight* and *Persona 5: Dancing In Starlight* wouldn't even have made it into development, are RPG fans and rhythm gamers two very separate demographics?



"I BELIEVE THAT THE KIND OF ENJOYMENT ONE GETS FROM AN RPG CANNOT BE EXPERIENCED IN ANY OTHER GENRE. IN THAT SENSE, THESE GAMES CATER MORE TO PERSONA FANS AND RHYTHM GAME PLAYERS."

"If we define *Persona* RPG fans as those who enjoy serious story content, then *P3D* and *P5D* might not appeal to them," admits Wada. "But if they like the characters and are longing for opportunities to interact with them in the series' world, then yes. This is something that requires great thought, but ultimately, I believe that the kind of enjoyment one gets from an RPG cannot be experienced in any other genre. In that sense, these games cater more to *Persona* fans and rhythm game players, but not as much to RPG fans."

"Transitioning from *P4D* to this project, I thought we should make a clear distinction – that we pay respect to the rhythm game genre. We do make an effort to understand the potential audience of this project, but there's no one way to define them, so it's rather difficult. The story and worldview of the *Persona* series are entwined with one another, but they aren't the same thing, so individual preference may depend on which of those the player values more."

ROOTS OF RHYTHM

Further to that discussion, there's the not inconsiderable challenge of taking a gameplay format that originated in Japanese arcades and moving it over to consoles while

retaining all the ingredients that made it popular in the coin-operated world. "It's difficult to gauge if we're talking about non-arcade games," says Wada when asked what makes a good rhythm game on a home console. "While there are differences between consoles and portable platforms, I think that the advantage home play has against arcades is that players are in a setting where they can really dive into the game without worry. I believe it's important to not only offer players many songs to play, but various modes with different play styles and collection features as well. That 'catering towards fans' mentality is what I believe to be key to success."

Rhythm games have come a long way from the arcade hits of the 1990s like *Beatmania* and *Dance Dance Revolution* and their difficulty level has risen over time so that, "the genre is giving off more of a hardcore impression than before" according to Wada.

"However, casual rhythm games on smartphones have become much more widespread in the recent years, and the rhythm game genre continues to be popular in arcades with games such as *maimai*, *CHUNITHM*, *Taiko no Tatsujin*, and *ONGEKI*. Music is a universal medium, and as long as there is wonderful music being created, I think [rhythm games] >>>

5. Matching patterns on the trousers and skirt – someone's going to have to go home and change. **6.** If no one is going to pick up all that money on the floor, then dammit, that's just wasteful. **7.** Not a step closer. Your dancing has been judged and found wanting!

Catherine

In addition to their work on the *Persona* franchise, designer Shigenori Soejima and composer Shoji Meguro worked together on 2011's *Catherine* for ATLUS. The game shares some common themes with *Persona*, particularly in the divide between the daytime and nocturnal worlds as protagonist Vincent struggles to navigate his own nightmares.



"P3 HAS A LONG HISTORY AND QUITE A SIZEABLE DISCOGRAPHY, SO IT WAS RELATIVELY EASY TO PICK OUT SONGS TO MATCH UP WITH THE CHARACTERS. P5, ON THE OTHER HAND, WAS MORE DIFFICULT DUE TO THE FACT THAT THERE AREN'T AS MANY P5 SONGS, LET ALONE ONES WITH VOCALS."

>>> will continue to exist, while likely evolving over time. Fundamentally different from RPGs, rhythm games can still be considered 'games' even with very minimal features, so there is still a lot of potential to be explored."

As for the future of the *Persona* franchise, there are still fresh avenues to explore. "The RPG is the *Persona* series' core identity, so it's important for us to release the next iteration without taking too much time," says Wada. "That being a given, I'd personally like to explore other genres as well. There are still many other genres out there that are compatible with RPGs,

and there are a lot of other things that I'd like to do in a game. For example, maybe a game that isn't set in Japan, or one featuring characters with a wider age range. I wish to continue delivering titles with unique appeals for everyone to enjoy, so please look forward to our future offerings in the *Persona* series."

Feel the groove with *Persona 3: Dancing In Moonlight* and *Persona 5: Dancing In Starlight* which are out now on the PlayStation4 from SEGA. ●



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